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Principals' perceptions of the MCAS : the impact of high stakes testing in Massachusetts.

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PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE MCAS: THE IMPACT OF HIGH STAKES TESTING IN MASSACHUSETTS

A Dissertation Presented
by
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DEDICATION

To my wife and inspiration Julie,
for continually believing in me;
my sons Hayden and Connor,
for being patient for so long.

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I would like to thank the twelve participants of this study who with candor and emotion shared their knowledge and experiences with me. All twelve principals were extremely generous to take time out of their busy schedules to discuss educational issues concerning their roles as principals in an age of testing. As a building administrator, I understand how valuable a commodity time is and I truly appreciate their willingness to make time for this important topic.

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ABSTRACT

PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE MCAS:
THE IMPACT OF HIGH STAKES TESTING IN MASSACHUSETTS

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The primary goal of this study was to investigate principals' perceptions of the MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) and the "high stakes" nature of the exam. Twelfth grade students who have not passed either the English Language Arts or Math sections of the MCAS will not receive a diploma starting in the 2003. A decade after the signing of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993, educators are still grappling with the ever-changing educational landscape and how to best increase the amount of learning occurring in schools. The MCAS serves as the formal educational assessment system in Massachusetts.

This qualitative study involved individually interviewing twelve middle/elementary school principals from Massachusetts, all of whom had at least ten years of experience as a building administrator. The principals were categorized by MCAS results as well as school demographic settings (urban, suburban or rural) in order to provide a representative sampling similar to that found in the state. An interview guide with a specific set of twelve predetermined questions was utilized for

the semi-structured interviews. The first five questions were previously used in D.F. Brown's study of principals' perceptions in Illinois, New York and Tennessee in 1993. The remaining questions were geared toward eliciting responses specific to the MCAS. Responses from the participants were analyzed using an inductive process that allowed themes to emerge from the data.

Findings from the data analysis included three themes: principals from higher performing schools spoke favorably about the MCAS, principals from all categories were concerned over the public release of the scores, and finally principals from lower scoring schools felt that there is too much pressure to improve their MCAS scores. Further analysis of the data included a comparison of themes from this study with that of Brown's 1993 study.

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CHAPTER 1

DISSERTATION RATIONALE

Introduction

Over the past several years, standards-based reform movements have swept across the nation's schools. State legislatures have developed intricate reform policies aimed at improving the educational environments and outcomes for students. Standards established at the state level guide local districts in developing properly aligned curricula. At the national level, President Bush recently signed a revised version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act which will require that states annually assess student reading and math in grades three through eight. Assessments used to measure students' abilities in reference to the standards are now used in almost every state. In particular, Massachusetts has been at the forefront of this movement.

In 1993, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts enacted the Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA) as an initiative to improve drastically the state of learning in public education. According to the Massachusetts Education Reform Review Commission, the philosophical underpinning of the MERA has been to "provide equity in the educational opportunities afforded to all K-12 students…and to improve students achievement by dealing systemically with all of education's complexities" (Minkoff et al., 2001).

One of the measures designed to assess student learning has been testing through the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). Students in grades three through ten are required to take different sections of the MCAS, which are based

upon the curriculum frameworks designed by the state.[1] When students take the exam in the tenth grade they are required to score at least 220 out of a possible 280 points in order to receive a passing grade, which is then tied to the reception of a diploma.

As in other states, testing has become the primary method for states to hold students, teachers, administrators and schools accountable. Education reform uses standardized assessment as a means of ensuring that students are receiving the proper educational preparation to further enhance their lifelong opportunities. All students, regardless of race, gender, socio-economic status, learning style and/or disability, have the same vehicle--the test--to prove themselves as educated students.

Although only part of the reform, the MCAS, has become the focal point for educators, government officials, and the public. Scores for the MCAS are released to the media a few days after schools have had the opportunity to review them. Results are published in the Boston Globe and other media outlets where schools and school districts are ranked in descending order from highest to lowest. The public release of the scores in late October has become a time of stressful anticipation for educators and students in the public sector.

With the formation of parent groups concerned about the impact of the MCAS on their children's education, as well as student suspensions for boycotting the exam, much attention has been directed toward the negative consequences of the test (Daniel, 2000; Steinberg, 2000). Concerns over how the test affects the ways teachers teach have also become paramount. Accordingly, while the impact of the MCAS on students, teachers, and parents has led to scrutiny over the tests' effectiveness, little attention has been given to how the MCAS affects public school principals.

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[1] See www.doe.mass.edu for further information on the MCAS.

As the main instructional leader of an educational community, the principal is responsible for a school's learning achievement. The MCAS directly affects the role of the principal as the educational leader and visionary for the students, professional staff and community since s/he must preserve the integrity of a given school. This includes maintaining a level of public trust in the academic and social success of all students attending the institution. Such accountability necessitates careful attention to how the MCAS impacts principals' abilities to fulfill their roles effectively.

Purpose and Significance of Study

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the perceptions principals have developed about public education and the MCAS. While principals have had the opportunity over the past eight years to align curricula and teaching with the MCAS, it has been a long and arduous process. Massachusetts, as well as other states, is currently experiencing a shortage of qualified persons willing to be principals in the state (Snyder, 2002). Additionally, principals are retiring at a pace so fast that many school districts have been forced to contract out for interim school leaders or hire recently retired principals.[2] Principals are also attending more meetings and have increased the number of hours they work per week (Massachusetts Elementary School Principals' Association Survey, 1998). With the position of principal becoming less enticing to would-be administrators because of the workload and demands associated with the job, it becomes even more vital to assess the impact the MCAS has had on principals.

[2] I have personally worked with two "retired" principals who were hired because of the shortage of qualified professionals.

This study is significant because a minimal amount of research has been conducted on the beliefs and perceptions principals have concerning standardized testing, high stakes testing and the MCAS. One reason for a lack of research on this topic is that researchers, educators and the general public often overlook the building principal when educational research occurs. Over the past several years studies and articles concerning teachers' attitudes about high-stakes and standardized testing have been conducted regularly.[3] Teachers are often polled or interviewed because they are considered to be on the front-line of the educational endeavors constantly evolving in today's schools. Unfortunately, principals have not been recognized in the same degree as teachers within the confines of educational research. The success of any educational reform movement is dependent upon all parties involved, including the building principal.

The principalship is a position that requires a great amount of understanding, empathy, knowledge and leadership. In a time when education is experiencing perhaps the most costly and vast reform movements ever, the principal as educational leader has not taken an active role in the reform process. Principals spend a great deal of time monitoring the curriculum to ensure that it is aligned with state frameworks, but many principals feel as though they were neglected in the "process." Murphy and Louis voice their concerns regarding the silence of the principal in the current reform movement:

> What does, however, concern us is the possibility that principals have been silent and passive partners in this enterprise, allowing others to define what school leadership is. While acknowledging that part of the stress experienced by many principals today is the result of the complex set of challenges and demands facing them and their schools, we suspect that another contributor to personal and professional tension is that principals themselves have not thoughtfully and proactively defined – for themselves and others – either educational purposes or their roles in helping to achieve these ends. (Murphy & Louis, 1994, p. 4)

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[3] Quality Counts 2001 included a survey of 1,019 public school teachers concerning their beliefs about testing and standards to "provide a classroom-eye view."

In order for a principal to serve as the educational leader of her/his community, it is vital for him/her to understand what is being taught in the classrooms. In the ever-expanding world of knowledge, especially with the advent of computer-based learning including software programs and access to the Internet, it is impossible for the building principal to fully comprehend all of the information being shared in the school. With the current education reform movement in which curriculum standards have been established, the building principal is now more apt to understand what is being taught at the various grade levels in a school. The frameworks act as guides for the instructional leader, the principal, to base the school curriculum upon. One of the most important aspects of a principal's job is to now monitor the alignment of curriculum with school and state assessments (NAESP, 2001). In the state of Massachusetts, the MCAS tests student knowledge of the information found within the curriculum frameworks. Since principals are judged by their test scores, it is in their best interest to continually examine what is being taught to students.

In every facet of the administrative position, principals are required to have strong leadership skills as well as the ability to develop and maintain excellent educational programs. According to Blumberg and Greenfield, the principal is the central figure of life within a school and has the ability to direct the school through his/her actions (1986). With the introduction of standards-based testing, principals are now critically viewed as the instructional leaders of their schools (Burkett & Kimbrough, 1990). A principal's overall achievement is no longer solely based upon his/her managerial success or public relations savvy. Instead, a building administrator is now also judged by "the impact of the principal on student learning" (Blumberg & Greenfield,

1986). More than at any other time in the history of education, the job of principal has taken on additional meaning.

This study seeks to assist principals' by allowing them to synthesize and define their roles in relationship to the MCAS. It is important that principals have the opportunity to voice their opinions and beliefs about such a significant educational topic.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used throughout this paper and require specific definitions:

- Norm-referenced testing – An approach to testing in which an individual's score on a test is interpreted by comparing it to the scores earned by a norming group (Borg, et. al). This term will be used when discussing standardized test scores, such as the SAT.
- Criterion-referenced testing – An approach to testing in which an individual's score on a test is interpreted by comparing it to a prespecified standard of performance (Borg, et al). This term will be used when referring to new assessment tools such as the MCAS.
- High stakes testing – A standardized assessment that provides consequences, such as retention, for unsatisfactory test scores. I will be discussing the evolution of high stakes testing and their relevance to understanding current reform initiatives.
- Participant – A person who willingly participates in an activity (study). All interviewees consulted in this study will be referred to as such.

- Perception – What a person perceives of the world around them. I will be utilizing the term to refer to the principals' understandings of the current educational reform movement in Massachusetts.

Format of the Dissertation

Chapter II will provide a review of the literature pertaining to the history of testing in the United States as well as recent trends in educational assessment measures including the MCAS. The first part of Chapter II is divided into six sections with each detailing one particular issue associated with the history of testing: (a) The Written Exam, (b) Educational Movements of the 20th Century, (c) Testing and Educational Philosophies, (d) The Rise of Standardized Testing, (e) A Nation at Risk, and (f) National Education Reform in the 1990's. Part two of Chapter II details current issues in educational testing that are influencing how principals are managing the educational processes occurring in today's schools. This part is also separated into sections that review the following topics: criterion referenced vs. norm-referenced tests, accountability across the nation, public reaction to testing, and educational responses to standardized testing. The final section of Chapter II gives a brief overview of the MCAS.

Chapter III details methodologies utilized in the research and analysis phases of this study. The first section describes the qualitative research aspects of the study (interviews), including a rationale for the use of inductive/holistic analysis as a research methodology. The ensuing section discusses the analysis of the data.

Chapters IV, V and VI provide a summary of the findings of the dissertation and explore the implications of this study on future educational research. Subsequently, these sections entail an analysis of the limits and contributions of this study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

A Brief Overview of Testing in the United States

> *The primary purpose of educational assessment should be to insure success, success from the beginning, and success that is ongoing. Assessment should permit success by determining if a student is ready, has sufficient skill to begin instruction, or is able to move to the next instructional step. Assessment should be used to monitor the instructional process to make certain that an appropriate match is being maintained between student ability and instructional activity.*
>
> *Brigance and Harris, 1993*

Educators, legislators and the public have been grappling with the idea of testing students to assess their knowledge since formal education began in our country only a few hundred years ago. Over the years, researchers have documented how standardized tests have grown to become the premier way by which to judge a student's overall academic achievement is assessed.

In order to fully understand how the current condition of testing came to be, we must first review the history of testing in educational settings. This examination is important because it allows for a better understanding of how testing originated in the United States and documents the common threads found in all forms of testing. Although testing would appear to be a modern method of gauging student knowledge with the advent of the computer, the actual origins of testing transcend the technological barriers of the pre-computer age. The common theme of assessing how much information a student has garnered after a set amount of time has been the main theme of testing throughout the history of the United States.

Beginnings

The origins of testing in our country are connected to the original developers of oral and written examinations. Testing in this country began with the introduction of the oral examination in the early 1700's at the university level (Wiseman in Madaus and O'Dwyer, 1999, p. 8). Oral examinations had been commonplace in European universities and learning institutions for centuries. Students were only required to defend their comprehensive studies orally, without having to respond in writing.

After studying archival letters written by Horace Mann, Madaus and O'Dwyer found that Mann introduced the first written examination to the public schools of Boston in the mid 1800's (1999). Much to the dismay of the schools' headmasters, Mann believed that tests were necessary to best determine the progress of Boston's public school students. While he sought a means for better assessing student progress, Mann's motives were actually twofold: he deliberately chose to establish a written exam to provide the basis for a school-by-school comparison. This comparison would allow Mann to compare schools based on student test scores and consider changes in those institutions that did not perform well. Headmasters were opposed to such comparisons as well as Mann's charge to abolish corporal punishment. Not unlike many of today's opponents to publicly posted test scores, educators from the past also felt threatened and demoralized by public comparisons.

Boston was not the only city conducting such tests during this era. Portland, Maine also began a form of standardized testing in the late 1800's (Hoff, 1999). Then - superintendent Samuel King developed a test that would determine students' understanding of the Portland curriculum. With Massachusetts and its other modern day

counterparts, scores were published in the local newspapers so that the public would be privy to the assessment of the learning occurring in the school system. King resigned after objections to the public release of the scores became too great an issue.

Both Mann and King were predecessors of today's educational reform movement supporters. These pioneers in the development of the written examination sought a more consistent manner of assessing students' knowledge. With the establishment of written examinations, students were judged not only on their knowledge but also their ability to convey that knowledge in writing. Although it began over a century ago, testing to quantify what knowledge students have attained continues to be the primary goal for advocates of educational testing. Testing had found its place in the realm of education through people such as Mann and King, yet it had not yet won wide public support. It would take several more years before the idea of mass testing and assessment would become a staple in student assessment.

Educational Movements at the Turn of the 20th Century

As time progressed, testing continued to find an educational audience interested in changing the structure of academic assessment in public education. At the turn of 19th century, there were several educational movements underway (Lemann, 1999). Most of the movements would impact education minimally, but four of them would lead to drastic modifications in how education and testing occurred in the U.S.

The first was the Progressive Movement led by renowned educator John Dewey. Progressive educators were divided into two distinct groups. Dewey's supporters believed that schools were becoming too rigid and restrictive for students to learn as

individuals. The more business-like administrative progressives argued that schools should be more efficient and factory-like. In fact the Carnegie Foundation funded the Eight-Year Study in the late 1920's and early 30's where almost 30 high schools were encouraged to be less strict and regimented with their curriculums and standards. The liberal Progressives felt that education would be hampered by factions hoping to standardize the educational process and they sought testing as a means of measuring intellectual aptitude instead of prescribed knowledge (Lemann, 1999). The Progressives were determined to develop a new form of the college entrance exam that would measure more than just rote comprehension.

The second movement was supported by persons who believed that educational standards were the key to successful students. This "standards based" movement, like Dewey's, also had a Carnegie funded study called the Pennsylvania Study. William Learned and Ben Wood conducted an exhaustive study of the various high schools and colleges in the state and found them to be in disarray. The standards from one school to another were so drastically different that the students graduating from high school and entering colleges and universities had not learned a common core of basic knowledge. The importance of their findings was that students were not being held accountable for learning at a consistent level. Wood also developed his own standardized exam and administered the test to students from high school through college. His findings confirmed that many students who had completed several years of college scored lower than students who did not attend college after graduating from high school. The standards movement sought to test all students and allow only the best students to attend college.

The third movement was promoted by those who supported intelligence testing, a direct result of the immigration issues confronting well-educated, upper-class America. Advocates of IQ testing believed that they had irrefutable evidence that certain people were born with a higher degree of intelligence and thus deserved their proper place in society. This so-called genetically inherited intelligence was also the basis for the eugenics movement (Lemann, 1999).

Terman and others believed that it was in the best interest of the human race to permit only the brightest persons to become the natural leaders. Terman believed that humans could be classified simply by their race or ethnicity. Ultimately, Terman and his racist views were inherent traits which were also shared by the eugenics movement. In his research, Vito Perrone came across a quote by Terman himself from the book, The Measurement of Intelligence, which referred to those who scored in the 70 to 80 IQ range. Terman explains:

> [Such intellectual deficiencies are] very common among Spanish, Indian and Mexican families the Southwest and also among Negroes. Their dullness seems to be racial; -or at least inherent in the family stocks from which they come....Children of this group should be segregated in special classes....They cannot master abstraction, but they can often be made into efficient workers.... from a eugenic point of view they constitute a grave problem because of their unusually prolific breeding (p. 13).

IQ testing, a valid and accepted method of classifying humans during this time, could be used extensively by schools to deliberately separate high and low scoring students. High scoring students would be encouraged to continue with their educational endeavors while lower scoring students would be forced to limit their formal education and work toward a vocation.

A final group of educators believed that education should not be reserved for only the "brightest" and wealthiest Americans. This group that included the developer of the Iowa Every-Pupil Testing Program, E.F. Lindquist, held that all students should have the opportunities to learn and become constructive members of society (Lemann, 1999). Expanders felt that testing for all students should eliminate opportunities only for a select few who would not have prospered under academically rigorous conditions such as college. Educational expanders such as Lindquist were interested in testing students without requiring a standardized curriculum that they believed would benefit only the brightest students. The education expansion movement closely resembles the reform movements of the early 1990's in that one of the primary goals for both was to equalize the educational opportunities for students through the use of testing.

Each movement was based upon the intense beliefs of their developers who felt that their specific movement was the ultimate agent of change for American education. All factions noted previously were attempting to change the face of education, but none was as financially successful as Terman, whose intelligence testing prevailed. His simple-to-administer and cost effective measurement tool permitted educators to quickly classify students into groups based upon their intellectual abilities. According to his own figures, Terman estimated that 250,000 students had taken the Stanford-Binet test by 1922 (Hoff, 1999).

Although the test was successful, Terman believed that schools would benefit even more from a standardized test that measured students' achievement in various academic areas. Hoff notes that, intelligence testing and the use of:

> tracking reflected the consensus of social scientists at the time that intelligence was a hereditary trait. By using a scientific instrument to group students, went the thinking in those days, school officials could find to serve students according to their innate abilities (p. 13).

Tracking for the sake of separating students by ability levels became the norm for schools across the country. Terman would eventually develop the "National Intelligence Test" for students through grade eight and would administer it to over 500,000 students (Lemann, 1999). The mass testing of the student population had begun and would become part of every student's academic life.

The "factory" model of education, whereby students were considered the product of the educational factory, continued to rule supreme throughout America's public schools in the 20th century. In 1909, Leonard Ayers published, Laggards in Our Schools, which not only depicted schools as businesses but also provided educators with an "Index of Efficiency." Schools, like factories, could be classified as more or less efficient based upon a detailed, numerically intense formula (Callahan, 1962, p. 16).

The "factory" model was a direct result of both the industrial era and the mass immigration into our country that occurred during that time. Educational scholar Ruth Mitchell notes that,

> …the United States was claiming its place as a world industrial power. It needed workers who would be able to follow orders and perform efficiently - human machines. The public school system expanded rapidly to meet the demand by providing a minimal education – the basics of literacy and computation – regarded as necessary for the job. It was a utilitarian schooling that commonly terminated at the fifth grade level. The ideal of a citizenry educated to participate in the political process was buried in the rush to provide workers (1992, p. 168).

Accordingly, the "human machines" were then tested to check the efficiency of the workers – educators – as well as the quality of the products – students. Order,

compliance, and basic knowledge were the mandates for all public school students during this era. The "factory" model set the stage for testing to become the means by which the best "machines" would be capable of providing the greatest output.

The Rise of Standardized Testing

While tracking became a means of ensuring educational efficiency, some 20th century educators sought new and more thorough means for classifying the general population in the United States. In Nicholas Lemann's, The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy, the author documents the origins of the SAT and the people who shaped educational testing for decades. Henry Chauncey and James Bryant Conant of Harvard began discussing the idea of placement testing. Both men believed that colleges and universities should be available to a wide variety of socioeconomically diverse students and through testing they could diversify the student bodies of colleges everywhere. The test would allow the best and brightest students to get into college regardless of their socioeconomic background. The Educational Testing Service arose from the beliefs of Chauncey and others like him who were convinced that that best minds should naturally lead the country. Consequently, ETS, the producer of the SAT and other standardized exams, became the world leader in the development of norm-referenced standardized tests.

As standardized tests became more of a national issue in the 1960's, many educators strove to eliminate standardized testing from schools altogether. Many educators were concerned that the local control of schools would be eliminated as national standards set through norm-referenced tests were becoming the benchmarks for

achievement. Educator Banesh Hoffman, a critic of educational testing, wrote in 1966 that the United States' fervor over testing was limiting the intellectual growth made by students in public schools. His harsh stance against testing is especially evident in the following quote:

> gifted teachers and trailblazers would be rightly dismayed to have their work federally evaluated by such misleading methods, just as artists would be if their colorful paintings were to be judged by persons who were color-blind or worse (1966, p. 9).

The amount of testing on the general populace was beginning to have a backlash effect in the realm of educational testing. More critics of standardized testing were beginning to voice their oppositions to these tests and to express concern over educational issues.

Hoffman was not alone in his opposition of educational testing during that era. Professor Harold Hand also wrote in the mid 1960's of his fear relating to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Hand's belief that the NAEP testing would result in a "coercive," form of national standards remains a fear for many current educators. After 30 years of existence, the NAEP is only beginning to become the force Professor Hand believed it would eventually become (1966). Even the Council of Chief State School Officers, comprised of educational representatives from all 50 states, produced a resolution in 1965 stating that,

> On the basis of changing views about IQ and other tests of innate intelligence in recent years, bringing general recognition that environment plays a greater part in the development of measurable intelligence than had previously supposed, we disapprove of excessive reliance upon ability test scores in the placement of pupils and other abuses of these scores (1966, p 52).

Despite some negativity about testing in the 1960's, most educators continued to rely upon standardized tests to assess students' progress. Tests such as the Iowa and

California Achievement Tests were inexpensive to administer and gave schools and states quick and accurate results. Brigance and Hargis observe that standardized, norm-referenced tests have many advantages when measuring general knowledge including their ability to be scored quickly and statistically scrutinized (1993). Although content validity was, and remains, limited with norm-referenced standardized exams, the country relied heavily upon this medium as a manner of measuring student achievement (Brigance, & Hargis, 1993).

In addition to continued dependence on achievement tests, the tracking of annual national scores such as the SAT ensued. Test scores from assessments such as the SAT were also beginning to decline for the first time since the inception of testing. According to researchers George Madaus and Anastasia Raczek, the national average SAT score declined by almost 50 points for the verbal and math receded by close to 30 points, over a 14 year period from 1963 to 1977 (1996). Many reasons were given for this unprecedented change in overall scores, including the change in the population of students taking the tests as well as the idea that schools were not preparing students adequately. It was believed that students were not being prepared to succeed in the world and accordingly the public schools took the blame. Thus testing to assess what students were *not* learning became the catalyst for the next generation of assessment tools.

A Nation at Risk

If schools were to better prepare students academically, testing became the means of improving the state of public education. In a 1983 report produced by the National Commission on Excellence in Education entitled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for*

Educational Reform, more rigorous standards for students were called for when measuring their academic performance and knowledge. Madaus and Raczek note that *A Nation at Risk* was a consequence of NAEP results, lower SAT scores, information from both the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement and from the Department of Defense (1996, p. 157). This information was so alarming to politicians, educators, and the general public that the immediate response was to revamp and overhaul the education system from state to state. Education reform once again became a focal point for politicians and educators.

With the *Nation at Risk* report, as well decreasing SAT scores, politicians and the general public called for tougher standards through education reform. The "world class" standard set by other industrialized countries became the ultimate goal for educational reform (Lockwood, 1998). In her recent book author Ann Lockwood quotes Thomas Rhomberg who says,

> World class is a political term that grew out of the international comparisons. Politicians argue that we should be first in the world in achievement, without describing what that means. It is a statement of political rhetoric without substance (p. 14).

Rhomberg continues by arguing that the U.S. is the only industrialized country that expects that every student in public education has the right to attend college after the completion of high school. Other nations have a finite number of students who attend college and do so for specific disciplines. Thus the educational standard for all students must be raised in order to ensure that students have the skills necessary to attend an undergraduate school. The "world class" standard is one that the U.S. is likely to have difficulty attaining because of its inherent belief that all students are capable of attending a post-secondary school.

For the first time in U.S. history, national standards for education were beginning to emerge in the late 1980's. In 1989, President George H.W. Bush met with governors from all 50 states to begin the process of developing the first set of national education goals. This step signified the beginning of a direct involvement of national leaders in school based testing.

In John Jennings book, Why National Standards and Tests?, the author examines the process through which Bush and Clinton developed national standards from the late 1980's to the present. He credits the most recent trend toward the establishment of national standards to the formation of the National Council on Education Standards and Testing (NCEST)(1998). Jennings notes specifically that the tone of the report produced by the NCEST was that of despair and included a call for a more complete educational experience including standardized tests designed for accountability. Jennings states that the report led national and state leaders to determine that,

> The quality of American education must be improved, and the current system of relying on local decision making over curriculum is failing to bring about that improvement. Standards must be established to make clear what students ought to know, and those standards must be challenging if American students are to improve their educational achievement (p. 8).

With this in mind, the three major presidential candidates of the 1992 Presidential campaign, George Bush, Bill Clinton and Ross Perot, endorsed a set of national standards for America's schools on their running platforms (Jennings, 1998).

National Education Reform in the 1990's

As Bill Clinton entered the White House in 1993, he had already put forth his belief that educational standards must be raised and revised nationally. Both Democrats

and Republicans were interested in changing how America's youth were educated. Ultimately, the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994* (Public Law 103-227) was the result of the bipartisan support of national standards and measurement. Researcher Robert Linn notes that the terminology and ideas used in *Goals 2000* is not far from the terminology used in *A Nation at Risk* almost 10 years earlier (1995). Both included a call for more rigorous academic standards as well as more assessments. All 50 states were taking part in the *Goals 2000* initiative by 1997 (Jennings, 1998). Subsequently, a large-scale testing regime at the state and national level was beginning to take hold with politicians and education reform advocates.

At the national level, former President Clinton had been an advocate for national standards in education since the late 1990's. In his 1997 State of the Union address, Clinton first mentioned the idea of a national test for all students. His belief that students, parents, and the public have the right to know what and how much is being learned by children, transcended party lines. If the federal government ever sought to develop such a test it would cost approximately 45 million dollars just to design (Barton, 1999).

Although discussions of a national test have been vocalized, there is a greater likelihood that evaluation measures will be monitored locally by individual states rather than the national government since states are reluctant to relinquish their local control on educational issues. Federal laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Act, the Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act, *Goals 2000* and others helped establish standards for states to follow in order for them to receive federal funding (McDermott, 2001; Goertz, and Duffy, 2001). The standards call for ongoing assessments and monitoring to ensure that states comply with federal guidelines linked to the laws.

Not unlike previous measures to judge student learning and/or intellect, current initiatives involve state-based criterion referenced assessments to measure a student's understanding of an established curriculum and are being used in almost every state in the union (*Quality Counts 2001*). Although these tests require students to demonstrate mastery of a content area such as Math, Language Arts, Science, etc., they have become a mainstay in assessing educational reform initiatives around the country. Like educators from our past, the current education reform proponents are seeking a more streamlined process for judging how well our education system is working. Moving from minimal educational requirements in the early 1970's to "high stakes" exams in the late 1990's, schools are asking more of their professional staff than ever before. In the next section, I will review current issues surrounding standardized testing/assessment including public opinion data on the subject.

Current Issues in Educational Testing: National Trends and Massachusetts

> *Specifically, state tests are overshadowing the standards they were designed to measure and could be encouraging undesirable practices in schools. Some tests do not adequately reflect the standards or provide a rich enough picture of student learning. And many states may be rushing to hold students and schools accountable for results without providing the essential support.*
>
> *Quality Counts 2001*

Presently, the United States is experiencing another wave of education reform. In order to justify the amount of money spent on education initiatives as well as meeting national educational requirements, state legislatures have mandated the development of assessments in almost all 50 states (Goertz, and Duffy, 2001). In the United States, 49

states have academic standards in certain areas and all states test their students to judge the amount of learning taking place (*Quality Counts 2001*). Assessments are used to appraise the mastery of a curriculum, decide which students graduate or advance to the next grade, and also detect schools that are succeeding and those who are not (McDermott, 2001). Of the 50 states, 24 of them, including Massachusetts, have implemented or plan on implementing high stakes exams within the near future (McDermott, 2001). State politicians have swiftly changed the educational landscape through vast reforms and intricate assessments designed to meet the needs of educational reform.

Testing has also become more frequent at multiple grade levels and states are testing in more grades than ever before. With the passage of the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) in 1994, states have been required to test students at least one time in grades three through five, six through nine, and ten through twelve, for a total of three tests (Goertz and Duffy, 2001). In the 1999-2000 school year, several states tested students according to the federal guidelines of the IASA. Many states actually tested students in more than three grade levels and in several different subject areas. Utah administers a form of standardized testing from first grade through grade twelve (*Quality Counts 2001*). Other states such as Nebraska, Wyoming, Iowa, test students the minimum (three) number of times in order to comply with federal funding regulations.

Educators from Hawaii to Maine have become increasingly cognizant of the use of standardized tests and assessments in public schools. States have spent enormous amounts of money to develop standards and exams for students, including high stakes exams that attach graduation requirements to certain test scores. Nationally, former

President Clinton voiced his opinion in favor of national standards and a voluntary nationwide exam to compare students across the country. One of the first agenda items for President George W. Bush was to unveil a comprehensive education plan that included testing for all students in both math and reading in the third through eighth grade (Olsen, 2001). President Bush recently signed the revised Elementary and Secondary Education Act into law. Accordingly, educators are scrambling to develop assessments as well as to provide support services and programs to students who do not score well on standardized assessments.

When President Bush signed the *No Child Left Behind Act*, his authorization to increase the federal role in education was for both monetary and accountability reasons. According to early figures established by the Bush administration, the current budget for federal monies earmarked for Massachusetts is over $900 million, providing $100 million more than in 2001 (www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/esea/massachusetts.html). To accompany the increase in money the Act also calls for testing of all students in grades 3 through 8 in both math and reading. Massachusetts currently tests students in several areas, including math and reading but not on a yearly basis. In order to meet the new federal regulations, state officials will need to further revise the MCAS to meet the requirements of both state and federal laws.

Criterion vs. Norm Referenced Tests

The latest generation of tests is quite different from previous testing regimens in this country. Criterion-referenced tests, such as the MCAS, have surfaced as the means of determining how much students are learning in today's schools. According to Borg, a

criterion-referenced test includes, "the interpretation of an individual's score by comparing it to a prespecified standard of performance," (1996, p.261). Norm-referenced tests differ greatly from norm-referenced tests of the past in that they are not used to sort or track students into academic classes. Norm-referenced exams involve comparing the test scores of students using a table of norms (Borg, et al. 1996). These tests also must have representative samples of questions dealing with specific skills and curriculum in order to measure instructional efficiency (Brigance, & Hargis, 1993). Ultimately, it is impossible for a norm-referenced test to include precise questions to determine the instructional effectiveness of teachers. The criterion-referenced tests used by many states today are specifically designed to test student knowledge of predetermined curricula established by a state. In essence, the standardization of the curriculum at the state level has permitted these types of tests to become the most acceptable form of large-scale student assessment at the state level. Criterion-referenced tests, such as MCAS, are better suited to measure instructional effectiveness, thus teachers may be held accountable for student learning.

Tests such as the MCAS differ greatly from earlier testing mechanisms. The standards-based reform movements of the 1990's led states to develop tests that measured student achievement based upon a predetermined curriculum. The standards established by states, such as the Curriculum Frameworks in Massachusetts, are used by districts as a guide for the development of their own curricula. The centralized control of the content of the Curriculum Frameworks, as well as criterion-referenced testing, ensures that districts across the commonwealth align their curricula and are consistent from town to town and district to district.

Accountability Across the Nation

Nationally, testing has made an important impact on education. Although each state has its own form of educational assessment, many of them have common ties that loosely unite them to similar topics. Accountability at both the school and student levels are two of the more prominent themes. School accountability in the form of report cards, ratings, and rewards or sanctions has become almost commonplace for educators. Forty-five states now have report cards for schools (*Quality Counts 2001*). Of these schools, nineteen of them also incorporate ratings (including Massachusetts) and eight more include rewards and sanctions. Five states, Montana, North Dakota, Idaho, Utah and Mississippi have yet to develop such systems of accountability for their schools. Of the 27 states that rate their schools principally by test scores, 11 of them use test scores exclusively, without incorporating any other information in the rating formula.

According to *Quality Counts 2001*, a concern associated with accountability is that, in their haste to develop and implement testing systems, many states have neglected the fact that their rating systems may not be equitable for schools or students. Some states have been accused of developing tests that do not sufficiently align themselves to state standards, thus student scores become irrelevant. States must develop tests that are aligned with the curricula of the state in order to assure students, parents, educators, politicians and the general public that the scores attained by students and are legitimate.

The ways in which states are holding students and schools accountable have become an area of contention among some educators and parents. In Massachusetts, the Education Reform Review Commission (MERRC) found that the state was using only one indicator of student proficiency, the MCAS, to rate both schools and students even

though the MERA calls for multiple indicators (Minkoff, et al. 2001). The Massachusetts Education Reform Act calls for a more thorough method of assessing students knowledge that would include "portfolio evaluations, performance tasks, and other more authentic assessment techniques," (Mass. DOE, 1993). Another report prepared for the MERRC asserted that the Massachusetts Board of Education decided to utilize only standardized assessments, rather than other forms of authentic assessment for reliability purposes as well as the costs associated with scoring more complicated exams (McDermott, et al. 2001). When parents and statisticians complained about the portfolio driven assessment systems in Kentucky and Vermont, both states modified their systems to include more traditional test measures, similar to those used for the MCAS (*Quality Counts 2001*). In fact, Clifford predicted that high-stakes results on the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS) would be challenged on the grounds that the assessment would not be considered psychometrically sound (1995). The precedent-setting moves to traditionalize the exams in Kentucky and Vermont would lead one to conclude that Massachusetts will not further modify their current system beyond that of fine-tuning the content.

Student accountability at the state level is also dependent upon the unique requirements established by the individual states. High stakes tests or exit exams are currently administered in 23 states, five of which have yet to require the exam for graduation (Quality Counts 2001). Three states, New Mexico, Louisiana and North Carolina, have both exit exams and promotion exams. Students in the states of Delaware, Texas, Ohio and South Carolina will also be taking promotion and exit exams by 2003.

Over half of the states in the country do not administer a high stakes exam or are planning on doing so in the near future.

Massachusetts has taken a unique route in order to reach its accountability requirements. When the state began the MCAS tests in 1998, only fourth, eighth and tenth grade students were required to participate in testing. Due to the fact that the tests were of great length and duration, many groups lobbied the Massachusetts Department of Education to change its policies. The state decided to move some components of the exams to other grades to ease the burden of testing in all subject areas at one grade level. Students now take English in grade three, English and Math in grade 4, History /Social Science and Science in grade 5, Math in grade 6, English in grade 7, English, Math, Science and History /Social Science in grade 8 and grade 10.

Public Reaction to Testing

Public opinion regarding standardized testing continues to be a point of contention for both opponents and proponents of the new assessment models. Data from three sources including *Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup*, Achieve and *Public Agenda* were reviewed. In the 33rd annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll, the public's opinion of testing and standards showed that the general consensus was quite positive for supporters of testing (Gallup & Rose, 2001). When asked if there was too much emphasis on achievement testing in the public schools, not enough emphasis on testing, or about the right amount, 44% believed that there was the right amount of emphasis. Although the public's attitudes toward the belief that there was too much emphasis on testing increased, from 20% in 1997 to 31 % in 2001, a larger portion of the population still

believe that the emphasis was sufficient. Despite the media blitz on the public concern over "high stakes" testing, 57% of those polled favor the use of one standardized test to determine whether a student should receive a diploma. The "high stakes" component of the MCAS, which includes a minimum score of "needs improvement," at the high school level, has been the most controversial aspect of the entire assessment system because of the "no-pass, no-diploma" stakes. Those who believed test scores were the best way to measure student academic achievement increased from 26% in 2000 to 31% in '01. Interestingly, 65% held that the best way to measure student achievement was through classroom work and homework. Finally, a question about the primary use of tests lends credence to those who believe that tests should be used to determine the kind of instruction students require in the future, not how much students have learned. A majority of those polled, 66% believed that tests should primarily be used to determine instructional needs, thus countering the support and arguments for "high stakes" exams.

Recently, *Achieve Inc.* published a compilation of information from public opinion polls for their 2001 National Education Summit (Gandal and Vranek, 2001). Citing information from a variety of sources, including *Public Agenda, Quality Counts, ETS* and others, the information garnered from the polls was generally supportive of the standards movement currently underway. According to the Reality Check Survey by *Public Agenda*, a non-profit, non-partisan public opinion research organization, 81% of those polled feel that the implementation of standards has been careful and reasonable. Only 11% of parents polled in a *Public Agenda* survey believe that there is too much testing. Standards and testing both receive positive feedback by the general public and

parents of school aged children further bolstering the argument of standards-based reform initiatives.

Public Agenda also recently conducted two polls in 2000 that found that 69% of the respondents favor the use of statewide tests in order to graduate from high school. However, 62% of parents believe that it is wrong to use the results of only one test to determine graduation. These findings suggest that parents generally agree with high stakes testing, as long as multiple assessment opportunities are available to students. For example, Massachusetts offers several chances for students to retake the MCAS exam in order to receive a passing grade, and ultimately, a diploma. Evidence from the data reviewed indicates that the public believes testing should be part of the educational process in the U.S. Nevertheless some contention remains about the primacy of using "high stakes" exams to measure student achievement. No one is sure what the correct amount of emphasis on testing should be although public support remains for the continued educational reform movements and their accountability measures.

Educational Responses to Testing

In conjunction with public opinion polls surveying parental and public responses, educators and educational associations have recently been analyzing and reviewing the current use of testing. According to Professor William Mehrens, the large-scale assessment programs currently being used, tested, or designed by states throughout the country are fashionable with the public and political parties (1998). Mehrens continues by mentioning that the most popular reasons for assessment are "improvement of

instruction" and "program evaluation," both of which motivate the political bodies at the state and national level to encourage broad-based assessments of students.

Accompanying the standards-based assessments have been position statements issued by educational entities from a variety of venues including teachers, superintendents, testing companies, researchers and others. In July of 2000, the American Educational Research Association (AERA) issued a position statement concerning high-stakes testing in pre k-12 education in direct response to the sheer number of states that have instituted such tests.[4] In their proclamation, the AERA highlights 12 specific areas that should be reviewed before, during and after the use of the assessment tool including the protection against high stakes decisions based on a single test, alignment between the test and the curriculum, and opportunities for meaningful remediation for examinees who fail high-stakes tests. With guidelines, such as the ones provided by the AERA, states may revise and modify their "high stakes" assessment systems to better assist the students in achieving success.

AERA's position statement also warns of the consequences associated with the misuse of tests. It reports that setting high standards for test results may be favorable in stimulating increased effort from students and educators to work harder. It also believes that with the use of high-stakes tests:

> ...where educational resources are inadequate or where tests lack sufficient reliability and validity for their intended purposes, there is potential for serious harm. Policy makers and the public may be misled by spurious test score increases unrelated to any fundamental educational improvement; students may be placed at increased risk of educational failure and dropping out; teachers may be blamed or punished for inequitable resources over which they have no control; and curriculum and instruction may be severely distorted if high test scores per se, rather than

[4] An example of a high-stakes test is one that carries serious consequences for students and/or educators. A consequence may be retention in a certain grade if a score is not sufficient.

> learning, become the overriding goal of the classroom, (AERA Position Statement Concerning High Stakes Testing in PreK-12 Education, 2000, p. 2).

The AERA does not oppose the use of standardized tests. In fact, it believes that the testing associated with the standards movement will ultimately improve education. Rather, the contention is that without the proper resources for schools and/or the development of appropriately aligned and developed tests, scores from the exams will not be fair for the school, student, teacher or administration.

With testing becoming such an important part of the educational landscape within which a principal functions, it is important to understand why accountability affects every aspect of school life. Danielson (1999) developed four conventional assumptions about accountability and how it affects public school principals:

1. *Student Testing to Achieve Curriculum Alignment*: In order to ensure an alignment of mandated curriculum with the curriculum that is actually taught, tests which directly address and assess the desired curriculum are needed.

2. *The Importance of a Clear Criterion for Success:* Teachers and principals will work harder and more productively if the outcome, in terms of student learning/achievement, is clearly identified and measurable.

3. *Motivation Through Rewards and Sanctions*: Motivation for success, as measured by student test scores and state expectations, will be enhanced if high student achievement is rewarded. Likewise, motivation to avoid failure will be enhanced if inadequate student performance results in negative consequences.

4. *Public rating for Identifying the Relative Success of Schools*: Assigning ratings to schools, as determined by state standards for student academic growth and measured by state standardized tests, will serve to provide a descriptive image of effectiveness understandable by the general public as well as educators.

The state in which her study occurred, North Carolina, tests students in elementary through high school with "high stakes" consequences associated with the test, including retention by the year 2003 (*Quality Counts 2001*). The state categorizes schools by how

well they perform on the state test: School of Excellence, School of Distinction, Exemplary, Met Expectations, No Recognition, and Low Performing. The four general assumptions about accountability are all important aspects of researching principals' perceptions since they are universal and are easily transferable from state to state. Danielson's research will be discussed later in this chapter.

As the standards movement enters into a second decade, schools have changed their expectations for student achievement. With almost every student in the nation being tested annually from third through tenth grade, the "bar" has been raised for everyone. Students are required to have a minimum knowledge base in order to succeed. Teachers are now being held accountable for what they are teaching. Administrators are responsible for even more aspects of the reform movements.

The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System

In the spring of 1993, former Governor William Weld signed the Massachusetts Education Reform Act. This act brought sweeping reform to all aspects of public education in the Commonwealth, including the funding formula for districts, standards developed for educators and students, and the development of an assessment system that could gauge the learning occurring in Massachusetts schools.

Prior to the development of the MCAS there was another formal assessment program used by Massachusetts. Beginning in 1988, the Massachusetts Education Assessment Program (MEAP) was the first statewide assessment designed to assess academic achievement. The MEAP test was given to 4^{th}, 8^{th}, and 10^{th} grade students biannually with the schedule based upon the NAEP schedule. Scores for the MEAP were

established only for the school and district level, not for individual students. The testing took students approximately three hours to complete and students with disabilities and ESL students were not required to take the exam. The test consisted of questions concerning Math, Science, English/Language Arts, and Social Studies and included a variety of multiple choice and short answer response. The MEAP was an adequate measurement tool when the state did not have the curriculum frameworks as a guide for schools/districts to use. With the advent of the MERA, the MEAP could not possibly provide the detailed analyses/assessments required by the act. The act called for a comprehensive assessment program designed to evaluate how well students were learning the information in the curriculum frameworks. Specifically, the areas of Math, Science/Technology, English/Language Arts, and History/Social Studies were to be the first students would be tested on for the MCAS.

The MCAS exam in Massachusetts is considered a high stakes test for 10th grade students.[5] In order for students to graduate from high school they must receive at least a 220 on both English and Math. The score of 220, on a scale of 200 to 280, is the lowest possible score for students to remain in the "needs improvement" category before falling into the "failing" range. The state does allow students several opportunities to pass the test if they initially fail in 10th grade. This score is seen by some as too low, while opponents of the test believe that no one should be deprived of a high school diploma because of a test score. Professor Kathryn McDermott of the University of Massachusetts found that when comparing the MCAS exam with other high stakes exams in five other states, basing the comparisons on NAEP results, the MCAS was a more

[5] Schools in the city of Springfield, MA also view the MCAS scores as "high stakes" for 3rd grade students: student promotions based upon MCAS scores.

challenging test than that of the other tests at the tenth grade level (McDermott, 2001, p.16). As McDermott notes, the level of difficulty of the MCAS exam has been a point of contention because of its high stakes consequences, yet advocates of the test feel that by keeping the standards high, students from all demographics will strive to do better (Schwartz and Gandal, 2000). Recently, the Massachusetts DOE has modified the criteria for high school graduation to include the opportunity for students who do well academically, but who do not do well on the MCAS, to receive a high school diploma.

Proponents of the MCAS and other tests associated with the standards reform movements in the U.S. believe that the tests are necessary tools to measure how well students are being prepared academically. Organizations supported by private businesses, such as *MassInsight Education*, have been publishing flyers promoting the effectiveness of the MCAS for several years.[6] They believe that the test equalizes educational opportunities for all students by standardizing the curriculum, raising standards of proficiency, and also holding educators accountable for the educational outcome of every student. The backing of the MCAS by the business community also continues because of the belief that students currently graduating from high school are not a highly competitive or competent workforce ready for the global economy.

One of the most important issues for supporters of the MCAS is the high academic standard established by the exam. Spurred by the *Lake Wobegone* theory established in the late 20th century, some testing advocates sought more rigorous

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[6] Other groups such as *The Business Roundtable* and *Achieve Inc.* both support the standards-based reform movements because of general belief that the U.S. has fallen behind other industrial nations in how well the population is educated.

standards and tests for students[7]. Gandal and Vranek of *Achieve*, an independent, bipartisan, nonprofit organization interested in raising academic standards and establishing clear accountability for results when measuring those standards, encourage states to develop tests that grow in scope and depth as the curricula become more complex (2001). According to their research, tests at the elementary and middle levels have an appropriate amount of rigor, yet at the high school level the tests are sometimes not challenging enough. The emphasis placed on the "high stakes" testing by parents and opponents may have caused some states to actually lower the standards so that students are able to pass the tests. The authors believe that the lowering of expectations at the high school level is one reason for the large number of students who enter college requiring remedial reading, writing, and math courses.

A final reason supporters of the MCAS have rallied behind the exam is to further justify the amount of money spent by the state through the Education Reform Act of 1993. Through a specified formula seeking to equalize spending for per pupil expenditures across the state, the Act set a foundation formula that defined a set amount of money to be spent for each student. Through the foundation formula and intense funding by the state, school districts have received millions of dollars in support of new buildings, higher salaries, and enhanced technological infrastructures. With the increase in financial support, MCAS proponents believe that a certain level of accountability should accompany the spending and the MCAS is the perfect tool to do so.

Although there are many who find the MCAS to be an acceptable form of assessment, there are those who do not believe that the test adequately assesses students

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[7] John Cannell's study of nationally normed elementary achievement testing found that achievement scores in all 50 states were above the national average.

or schools. Opposition to the MCAS and standardized testing with "high stakes" consequences are born from the same argument as proponents have used in supporting them: educational equality. Proponents of the MCAS say that it will lead to equal opportunities for students because low-income schools will be forced to improve their educational standards or risk becoming state-run. Opponents offer the view that the MCAS will drastically impair the educational opportunities for low-income or minority students because of the "high-stakes" graduation requirement.[8] Those opposing MCAS also believe that too many schools are now teaching to the test, especially in the low-income, urban sections of the state. Proponents do not condone teaching to the test but do feel that standards should be set so that all students in all schools have similar opportunities to acquire knowledge.

Students, parents, teachers, administrators, the business sector, and the general community all have an involvement in the current trends in high stakes testing. Of all those aforementioned, school administrators/ principals have the most to lose or gain from the MCAS. The building administrator has the unique opportunity to enforce curricular changes, purchase test preparatory materials, and moderate the extent to which teachers "teach to the test."

The MCAS and the Principal

In order to fully understand the impact the MCAS has had on education in the Commonwealth, it is essential to understand how the building principal has been affected by the changes associated with the test. Some might say that this is the best and worst

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[8] The Civil Rights Project at Harvard contends that although the scores of minority students have increased, the state does not factor the number of minority students who drop out of school before taking the test in 10th grade because they do not feel that they will be able to pass it.

time to be a principal. Principals have had the heavy burden of trying to raise test scores through the alignment of curricula, training of teachers to understand the new frameworks and increase use of technology in the schools. Job security has become an issue since principals have lost the ability to unionize or retain collective bargaining and often sign contracts from year to year, never certain of where they will be working during the following academic year. At the same time, the MERA provides principals with the opportunity to manage the schools more locally through a site-based management model. Principals supposedly have more autonomy to make building-based decisions with fewer restrictions placed on them by superintendents.[9] There has also been a vast influx of money into the schools and principals use their budgetary discretion to further develop and enhance the educational programming available to students.

After years of informal conversations about the MCAS with my colleagues, I decided that a study concerning principals' perceptions of the MCAS was a natural extension of those dialogues. Standardized testing is not a new phenomenon but the MCAS is much more than a Metropolitan Achievement Test or other nationally-normed test. The MCAS represents a radical change in how students, teachers, schools and principals are judged. The days of *Lake Wobegone*, where all students are above average, have departed. Principals now strategize about how to improve the MCAS scores among students in the lowest categories. Test preparatory materials that have always been part of the school culture are more pervasive now that students have specified areas of required knowledge through the Curriculum Frameworks. Principals encourage teachers to instruct students on how best to answer open-response essay questions or eliminate

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[9] Although participants in this study were not asked a question specifically relating to site-based management, I have had many informal discussions with principals about this topic and they usually report that they have had *less* autonomy since the MERA.

wrong answers in a multiple-choice question. With the advent of the MCAS, other forms of formal assessments including classroom observations, classroom tests and portfolios have become less important to many principals because of the consequences associated with the MCAS. Staff development and in-service opportunities often relate to testing or other test-related matters, rather than other educational issues facing learning communities. The conversations I have had have forced me to continually monitor my own view of the MCAS and frequently assess how I am responding to the test as a building administrator.

Principals' Perceptions Beyond Massachusetts

Administrators' attitudes regarding high stakes testing have been a topic of study for only a handful of researchers. Although many educators would agree that the building principal is the primary figure in determining educational outcomes for students, nominal research has been conducted on the topic.

Of the studies available on the subject of principals' perceptions of high stakes testing, a few include information directly related to the current analysis. One such study conducted by Cynthia Reed, et al, from Auburn University involved qualitative interviews of 26 principals in Florida regarding their perceptions on high stakes testing and empowerment (2001). Schools in Florida are rated and assigned a letter grade, A through F, based upon student scores on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Reed found that principals who were graded C or below by the state were extremely concerned about teacher and student morale, since the schools were labeled

average or below average. Principals found that teachers were demoralized by the testing and some feared the apathy associated with the testing would continue to expand.

Another component of the Reed study investigated the impact of standardized test scores on school and teaching practices. Reed noted that, "Principals in lower performing schools are more likely to modify their leadership focus to place a greater emphasis on improving FCAT scores. Principals in higher performing schools seemed to focus on educating the whole child rather than simply concentrating on raising test scores," indicating that higher performing schools were not as concerned about test scores since their scores were above average (p. 12). Interestingly, when asked to describe their school's greatest accomplishments, principals in the C through F range all mentioned focusing on or improvement of test scores. Principals in A and B mentioned items such as enrichment programs and other activities that were less focused on testing. Accordingly, principals in C through F schools believed that testing was a "detriment to their schools in terms of teaching....as well as their own ability to lead their schools" (p.14). Reed summarized by stating, "Principals in high performing schools appear to be freer to encourage good teaching practices, while many of the principals in lower performing schools were forced to expend energies attempting to raise student test scores" (p. 14).

Finally, all principals in the Reed study believed that high-stakes testing directly affected how they ran their schools. Administrators, regardless of their ratings, were all affected by the FCAT in some manner, but again, principals in lower rated schools were more likely to stress the amount of emphasis placed on the test. The C to F principals found that they spent more time and energy working with their teachers around

improving test scores, whereas principals in categories A and B felt less constrained by FCAT scores.

Another study that focused on Florida involved principals and their attempts to improve the scores of their schools rated in the D and F categories (Acker-Hocevar & Touchton, 2001). Although the study was centered on low performing districts, its relevance lies in the principals' perceptions of the FCAT. The authors noted that principals from economically challenged schools and districts were more likely to provide professional development for teachers around diversity and racial issues instead of curricular modifications to improve scores (Sparks, 2000 in Acker & Hover, 2001). With such populations, principals are forced to decide between improving test scores or meeting the non-academic needs of both teachers and students.

Although principals from low scoring schools welcomed accountability and were intent upon using data from the test scores, the majority of the principals were ardently opposed to the grading of the schools. The use of a single test, the FCAT, results in schools being graded from A to F and ultimately involves financial incentives. The negative ramifications associated with low scores forced principals to defend their schools, teachers and students. When speaking about the public release of test scores and grading, one principal remarked:

> The schools that have made the "F" and the "D" grades and scored really low and gotten all the publicity are the ones that need this kind of criticism the least. These are the kids that already come from F lives, F families, F neighborhoods. And now the state is saying you are an F student and we are going to show you are an F student by publicizing it all over the world (p.22).

Principals were also fearful of the stress and burnout teachers experienced as scores were released and schools were rated. The study found that many principals had

difficulty retaining qualified teachers for more than one or two years, not only because of the pressure associated with a rating of D or F, but also the level of poverty and diversity associated with the schools student population.

Lastly, Danielson's 1999 study of how principals perceive and respond to high-stakes accountability measures involved qualitative interviews of principals from North Carolina. Basing her study on four general assumptions of accountability, Danielson concluded that the public dissemination of scores relating to the End of Grade tests (EOG) forced principals and teachers to look at the tests more seriously. The Standard Course of Study (SCS), the mandated state curriculum, was tested through the EOG tests with schools like those in Florida being publicly ranked.[10] Although a majority of the principals disagreed with the ranking systems, the threat of a poor ranking forced principals to insure that the SCS was being followed in their schools.

Danielson also attempted to discern the productivity levels of principals in regard to rewards or sanctions issued by the state. The study found that many of the principals were uncomfortable with the state providing monetary rewards for scores and did not feel motivated by such rewards. Principals were motivated by the negative consequences associated with the low-test scores to at least meet state expectations. Thus negative consequences and sanctions served to motivate building principals much more than positive rewards.

A final conclusion reached by the study detailed the effectiveness of the public release of the rating system. Although the principals clearly understood what each category represented, they did not believe that such categories were truly representative of the learning occurring in their schools. Danielson believes that the general public is

[10] North Carolina rates schools as *Exemplary, Met Expectations, No Recognition* and *Low Performing*.

much more inclined to accept statistical accountability systems over subjective forms of assessment and accountability, further justifying the use of rating systems for public education institutions. She also argues that the media has played such a vital role in how testing information is both categorized and disseminated to the general public that they become the gatekeepers to how the public perceives the educational system in North Carolina.

Summary

Testing has been conducted in this country since education was formalized in the 1800's. There have been many changes in how testing occurs including the introduction of the written exam. As the country matured, educational institutions and individuals sought better ways to assess student knowledge including the establishment of the mass-produced achievement test. The economy has also played a vital role in the history of testing since much of what transpires in education is directly related to the status of U.S. businesses. Students are expected to be prepared to enter the workforce directly from school and continue to support the business infrastructure that has become such an important part of our society.

As the educational leader of a school, a principal has the tremendous responsibility of creating a learning environment suitable to the needs of his/her community as well as one that supports local reform initiatives. In Massachusetts, the building principal has been transformed by the MCAS. In the next chapter, I will describe the methodology used for this study of how principals perceive the MCAS.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The primary goal of this study is to investigate principals' perceptions of the MCAS and the high stakes nature of the exam on their schools, students, teachers and community. The following items in this chapter elaborate on the design of this research project as well as the methodological manner in which it will be conducted. The essence of this research relies heavily upon my experiences as an educator and the relationship I developed with the participants of the study. As the study commenced, changes and modifications were made to the original design in order to account for unanticipated issues that arose during the interview stage.

Design

The methodology used for this research study is qualitative in nature. Qualitative research is based upon the belief that individuals construct their reality through their experiences and the interview process permits the researcher to better understand how those realities came to be (Seidman, 1998). Qualitative research has also been defined as any type of research that produces results that are not created through statistical analysis or quantitative interpretation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Through the use of qualitative interviews, the researcher is able to develop a bond and relationship with the participant that may yield more in-depth information than other forms of research (Borg, et al, 1996). Hoepfl synthesized the traits most commonly found in various researchers' descriptions of qualitative research:

1. Uses the most natural setting
2. Researcher is the instrument in data collection.
3. Relies heavily upon inductive data analysis
4. Research analysis is descriptive with expressive language.
5. Is interpretative by nature with the researcher interpreting the experiences and meanings of the person being interviewed
6. Focuses on both the distinctive and obvious qualities
7. Has an emergent design whereby the evolution of the research is guided by the interview process
8. Is assessed based upon the unique trust established by participants (1997).

All of the aforementioned qualities contribute to this type of study being comprehensive, detailed and valid.

Methodological Approach

This study focuses on principals' perceptions of the MCAS and high stakes testing. In order to better understand how and why they came to their beliefs about these issues, it is crucial for the researcher to develop an understanding of the participants' belief system. This particular topic lends itself to a rendition of inductive/holistic research whereby participants are interviewed using a semi-structured approach and interview guide. Seidman explains that perhaps the best research method for examining the human experience is the interview (1998). The interview provides the researcher the opportunity to describe the experience of the participant as well as providing links between all of the participants. Through the use of open-ended questions, the semi-structured interview

process in qualitative research may provide the researcher with the opportunity to find new information (Hoepfl, 1997). Qualitative research may be used in order to increase the amount of understanding about a particular phenomenon or situation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As Patton notes, qualitative research is a continual process that cannot be finalized before the collection of information has been completed (1990). The researcher in a qualitative study collects, analyzes and interprets data, producing a compilation of information synthesized through the researcher's own interpretations. As Hoepfl appropriately remarks:

> Qualitative analysis requires some creativity, for the challenge is to place the raw data into logical, meaningful categories; to examine them in a holistic fashion; and to find a way to communicate this interpretation to others (1997).

In qualitative research, the researcher plays a vital role in both the gathering and analysis of data. This study continues with qualitative interviews as well an inductive/holistic analysis of the data. As with all qualitative research there are a myriad of models and methods for analyzing data including discourse analysis, domain analysis, content analysis, semiotics, narrative analysis, etc. This particular research study lends itself to inductive/holistic analysis in several ways. First, the researcher plays a significant role throughout the entire study that is part of the semi-structured qualitative approach. As Lofland and Lofland explain, the researcher's experience becomes intertwined in the study and eventually part of the analysis (1984). Second, a holistic methodology employs extracting small amounts of specified information and unifying them under larger themes (Patton, 1990). This study focuses on twelve participants whose responses are defined and broadly categorized into themes. Finally, inductive analysis entails extracting themes and categories from suppositions initiated at the

beginning of the study (Patton, 1990). Accordingly, as a grade 4 teacher, graduate student and building administrator during the past ten years, my experiences will play a vital role in both conducting the interviews and analyzing the data.

Research Project

This study comes at an opportune time, as the MCAS has become a prevailing factor in how students are educated in the Commonwealth. The public spectacle of the unveiling of MCAS scores through newspapers and the Internet has become an annual ritual throughout the state. News organizations are in such a frenzy to publish the scores that they actually took the Department of Education (DOE) to court because scores were being released to districts a few days before the public.[11] Each school and district throughout the state is ranked from best to worst in terms of score. The building principal has the duty of ensuring that the students in his/her school are performing up to the standards set by the state and more importantly the community in which he/she works.

Scope

The scope of this project involved individually interviewing twelve middle/elementary school principals from Massachusetts. An interview guide with a specific set of predetermined questions was used for the semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview allows both the participants and the researcher to delve into issues as they arise (Patton, 1990). Given the controversial and political nature of the MCAS, the interviews were conducted on an individualized basis to ensure

[11]The Boston Globe sought judicial intervention but eventually lost their bid at attaining the MCAS scores at the same time as school districts.

confidentiality. Interviews conducted individually are also less threatening than group interviews and will allow for more candid responses. All of the interviews were taped and transcribed at a later date in order to make certain that the information collected was complete (Seidman, 1998, Patton, 1990).

Data Collection

Since this particular subject affects every public school principal in the Commonwealth, it was necessary for me develop a certain criteria for this study. When Danielson researched principals' perceptions of the North Carolina ABC program, she segmented her participants so that she was sure to have at least one principal representing each of the different categories used for rating schools (Danielson, 1999). In order for the research to be representative of a cross-section of principals, this study has also been careful to find the proper blend of participants to further enhance the validity. Massachusetts does not actually divide its school categorically. Instead, schools are ranked from first to last in the state based upon their overall scores on the MCAS by the Boston Globe and other news media, a practice that is not endorsed by the Massachusetts Department of Education. In order to have a more representative sampling of principals, they were interviewed based upon their schools scores on the MCAS. Using the 2001 MCAS test results, I divided the overall scores of the schools into four categories based upon percentages. Accordingly, the schools were separated into their categories based upon the following percentages: A - 0% to 25%, B - 26% to 50%, C - 51% to 75%, and D - 76% to 100%. At least one principal was chosen from each category.

The principals chosen for this study have all been involved in public education in Massachusetts for the past 10 years. It is important to recognize that principals' perceptions would most likely be altered by the amount of time s/he has been an administrator so a time frame of ten years was established. Since the Education Reform Act was signed into legislation in 1993, at least ten years of experience ensures that the participants all have had a similar amount of time dealing with the topic of the study. Gender and race were also taken into account and were considered in the selection of the participants. A general template containing such information as well as school size, free and reduced lunch numbers, student demographics and other items was completed.

This qualitative study entailed three contact times for each of the twelve principals' interviewed. The first contact was a telephone call or Email correspondence introducing myself, the research topic and a request for their assistance. The second was the interview that took place at a location that the participant established. The third was the final meeting where we reviewed the transcripts from the interviews as well as the analysis of the data; the member check. Twelve principals were chosen for this study because of the in-depth nature of the interviews as well as the time associated with the analysis of the data. Patton asserts that there is no one criteria for the proper sample size for this type of research (1990). Since the schools are categorized by MCAS scores, the number of participants was determined by the researcher's ability to fully review and evaluate the data gathered during the comprehensive interviews.

Each interview consisted of twelve key questions as well as additional follow up inquiries. Five questions originally developed by researcher Dave Brown from his 1993 qualitative analysis of principals' and teachers' beliefs about state testing programs in

New York, Illinois and Tennessee were used to begin the interview. The relevance of Brown's study to this research project is threefold. First, Brown's study focused on principal's beliefs about testing as does this research. Second, he centered his research on state mandated testing and not nationally standardized tests such as the SAT-9 or MAT-8. Finally, Brown's questions transcend the barriers of a traditional study in that they are general enough to be used with administrators from any state. Using a set of questions from an earlier study allows for the comparison of data gathered in both sets of interviews. Although the studies are independent of one another and are unable to support any quantitative analyses, comparing responses from the studies serve to track administrators' perceptions of state testing. Brown utilized a nonscheduled interview guide as a means of collecting the information from respondents.[12] His questions were developed from the guide and are as follows:

1) Does the content of the state test reflect your priorities for instruction?

2) How effective have these state tests been in evaluating student achievement? *Probe*: Explain. How much do you rely on these tests in making decisions concerning students? Are these tests appropriate for assessing students in each of the subject areas taught? Why or why not?

3) How are the results of these tests used by this school? System? State? Are they used by any of these groups to alter what is being taught or how it is being taught?

4) Are you satisfied with the amount of emphasis placed on state assessment scores? *Probe:* Explain.

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[12] The guide serves to provide the same questions in a standardized form to ensure greater reliability.

5) If you were in a position to make decisions about testing, what would you recommend? *Probe*: (Any laws, policies) Why?

In addition to Brown's five essential questions, I was interested in discovering how the MCAS has specifically impacted the role and responsibilities of administrators in Massachusetts. Therefore, I also asked the following questions:

6) Describe how the MCAS test has affected your daily responsibilities as the educational leader of your school.

7) How do you feel the public release of the test scores impacts the school and community? How does it affect you?

8) How does the MCAS fit within your ideal vision of student learning gains/assessment?

9) How has MCAS changed the daily work of your school?

10) Have MCAS scores been a priority for professional development in your school? If "yes," in what ways?

11) What messages do you give the teachers on your staff about how to respond to the pressure to improve MCAS scores? Do you believe you are putting more time into teaching to the test?

12) How well informed are you about information pertaining to the MCAS and where do you usually obtain such information?

Although much of the previous research has focused on gathering survey data, this study goes beyond quantifying answers and will provide a more in-depth qualitative analysis of the issues facing administrators. Drawing from my prior experiences as a

teacher and administrator, I posed appropriate follow-up questions specifically geared toward relevant inquiries pertaining to the MCAS.

As with any controversial subject, the MCAS has its share of promoters and detractors who have certain beliefs about standardized testing, reform initiatives and accountability. When processing the data gathered from the interview questions, I expected to find that responses could be aligned with the thinking of certain groups who either support or oppose these educational issues. Think tanks such as *Achieve* are founded upon the belief that standards-based reform movements and accountability measures are the best ways to improve education. If *Achieve* were correct in its assumptions about education, I expected principals' responses to be positive and supportive of the assessment system currently in place. Specifically, questions such as #7 would most likely have a response relating to the positive aspects of comparing schools publicly to bolster educational competition. Principals would have also responded favorably to question #4, perhaps even adding that more testing in the future would benefit schools. *MassInsight*, whose primary goal is to "raise academic achievement for all students, including those who have been trapped in a cycle of low expectations," works collaboratively with schools, businesses and the Massachusetts DOE in supporting the statewide standards and assessment program (www.massinsight.com). Again, if associated with the values of *MassInsight*, principals would have had favorable responses to how testing has affected their schools. Principals could have said in response to question #8 that their vision of school reform includes a measuring device such as MCAS to assess student learning and pinpoint areas of weakness that require further assistance.

Principals would generally agree with the testing occurring in the state and view it as a change agent capable of drastically improving educational outcomes.

Conversely, those groups who oppose MCAS and the "high stakes" aspect of the test would find support from some principals who agree with their basic philosophies about testing. Organizations such as *MassParents* and *FairTest* believe in accountability and testing as long as the tests remain valid, fair and are not misused. *FairTest* also stresses the development of alternative assessment measures to offset the current trend in educational testing (1997). Principals who have the same opinions as *MassParents* and *FairTest* would most likely have responded negatively toward questions #1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8 and 9. Principals' responses would reflect their animosity about the amount of pressure put on educators to "teach to the test" in order to continually improve scores. Principals would also voice their concerns over the public release of test scores as well as the amount of emphasis placed on the MCAS by the state.

Having experienced the MCAS as a graduate student, teacher and assistant principal, I have had the unique opportunity of talking with a variety of administrators about the MCAS. As a student in graduate school, many of my conversations with building administrators involved the new standards established by the Education Reform Act and how the MEAP would soon be replaced with a more thorough assessment model to gauge student learning. Several principals were nervous at the concept of trying to align their schools curriculum with that of the new curriculum frameworks. Others were sure that the cyclical nature of education would bring an end to the standards movement and local control over education would prevail in only a few short years. The feeling of excitement that had come with the new funds from the MERA had been replaced with a

feeling of uncertainty. Some principals said they would not force their teachers to standardize their teaching just because the state wanted consistency. Many other principals viewed the time as an opportunity to improve teaching and develop more consistent educational practices.

As an assistant principal, I have spoken with a number of principals about how the MCAS has affected their daily lives. Now, almost ten years after the MERA, principals continue to debate the use of the MCAS as a means of assessment, but not as publicly as before. In public, I believe most principals will say that the MCAS is good for schools because it allows students to demonstrate how much information they have attained during their years of schooling. Behind closed doors, I think that many principals will agree that the MCAS has improved teaching in the state, but often at a cost to creativity in the classroom. Principals may believe that they are structuring their curriculums to support mathematics and language arts because those are the subjects on the MCAS that the state requires students to "pass" and are paying less attention to subjects such as science and social studies. They may also reveal that curriculum frameworks have both strengths and weaknesses that are difficult to test. No matter the belief, the job description of principal has been drastically altered by the MCAS.

Related Research

Research on principals' perceptions of standardized state testing has been done, yet there has been minimal research specifically on MCAS. In 1993, scholars Walter Sandefur and Reginald Hinely surveyed principals on their beliefs about the Texas student competency testing system (TAAS) and other education reform initiatives in the

state. The authors found that a majority of the principals believed the primary problem with the reform in Texas was that the testing influenced teachers to "teach to the test" too much (1993). Another interesting finding was that almost half of the principals felt that the requirements for the testing had an overall negative influence on the educational development of students. Researchers Corbett and Wilson have also conducted studies confirming the importance of further studying how principals have been affected by standardized testing (1990).

Factoring principals' perceptions into the review process of the MCAS is essential. Marso and Pigge have conducted a study dealing not only with principals' perceptions of standardized testing but also teachers, supervisors and testing directors. In their research they have found that principals are often in favor of standardized testing (1991). Principals are responsible for ensuring that the curriculum is followed in each classroom and is aligned with the state frameworks. Although teachers are ultimately responsible for the dissemination of the information to the students, they are usually only accountable for one grade level. Principals have to assure superintendents, school committees, parents and the community that *what* students are learning is directly related to the curriculum assigned by the state.

In some school districts, superintendents specifically incorporate MCAS performance into the annual goals for a building principal. An example of a goal might be for the school to improve 1% over the score from the year before. Principals' promotions and salaries can be tied directly to how well the students perform on the exam. Five principals were also rewarded for showing some of the most improved scores on the MCAS (Hermoine, 1999). Each principal was presented with $10,000 to spend as

they like from the Foundation for Partnerships.[13] For principals it literally pays for schools to do well on the MCAS.

Although research on the MCAS has been limited, it has not been neglected. Cara Livingstone Turner published her dissertation findings in 2001 on English teachers' experiences with the MCAS. In her conclusion she states that the MCAS has had both positive and negative effects on teaching. Teachers reported that they felt disempowered by MCAS, with their focus on curricular issues often becoming so overwhelming that they were unable to fulfill all of their curricular obligations. On the contrary, they also explained that the focus provided by the frameworks were "welcomed" and often created new occasions for increasing teacher independence. Likewise, the relationships teachers have developed with the MCAS may be similar to those developed by principals in this study.

While many of the studies associated with testing have sought to compare results, this study will seek to explore the evolution of a standardized assessment system. The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System has been in place for four years and has become the topic of many heated debates. With minimum research having been conducted on the MCAS, this study will inform public officials, educators, and the general population of the effects the testing has had on principals. By using Brown's set of questions, the research will adhere to a similar formula and will be used to compare responses from both projects.

As states continue to explore the benefits and drawbacks of mandated testing, further research is needed in order to best assess the learning that is occurring in the

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[13] The foundation is chaired by William Edgerly, president emeritus of State Street Corporation as well as the head of the pro-MCAS organization, Business for Better Schools.

schools. Accordingly, this study is one that will initiate discussion about MCAS and serve as a catalyst for further research on and refinement of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System.

CHAPTER 4

PRINCIPAL PROFILES & RESPONSES

The MCAS has been at the forefront of educational controversies in Massachusetts since it was introduced in the late 1990's. Since its contentious beginning, both advocates of and opponents to the test have vocalized their attitudes about the MCAS. Organizations such as the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents recently denounced the use of "high stakes" testing as a requirement for graduation. Teachers, parents, politicians, and the general public have all taken part in heated debates about the test. One party within the educational realm, the building principal, has had few opportunities to voice her/his beliefs about the assessment system that has become a symbol of education reform.

Principals are the educational leaders of their schools. They are no longer allowed to be only effective building managers. They must also be the instructional leaders, paving the way for teachers and students to become better educated.

This study focused on in-depth qualitative interviews with twelve elementary and middle school principals from central Massachusetts representing five school districts. Each principal was interviewed using a set of predetermined questions (scheduled) in a specified order. All of the principals were senior educators with an average of almost twenty years experience. Of the twelve principals interviewed, five were female and seven were male. Interviews were taped, transcribed and analyzed by the researcher.

Participants in this qualitative study were questioned about their beliefs pertaining to the MCAS, standardized testing and the principalship. The rights and welfare of the participants were protected since the participants partook in the study voluntarily.

Although none of the participants chose to do so, if at any time during the interview process a participant sought to withdraw their consent, they may have done so with the understanding that all data collection materials (notes and audio tapes) would be given to them. Information concerning my research methodology was shared with the participants through our initial phone conversation and email correspondences whereby they read a brief description of my study. A general statement regarding the methodology was also read to the participants prior to the initial interview. Informed voluntary consent was obtained for all participants through a letter that was signed by the participant and me prior to the interview.

Identity and confidentiality were maintained through the study by using pseudonyms for the names of the participants. Any information pertaining to the locale and names of either the school or school district was not used. Any identifying characteristics were removed from my final analysis, including the alteration of participant's gender in order to provide greater anonymity.

When developing the format for this study, I chose to define how the principals would be categorized for the interview process using the MCAS scores that were published in the fall of 2001. As noted in chapter three, the scores were divided into four areas from 0 to 100% and then classified as A, B, C or D. Schools scoring in the "D" category had the highest scores while schools scoring in the "A" category were in the bottom 25%. Using the ranking system published by the Boston Globe and other media sources, I divided the rank obtained for each school and at each grade by the total number of schools ranked for that test in the state. For example, if the school were ranked 422 out of 1073 on the grade 3 tests, the percentage would be 61. My goal was to have at

least one school from each of the four categories I had established in order to make certain that the range of participating principals was representative of a cross-section of today's schools. Of the 12 interviewees categorized, 2 were classified as "A"'s, 2 were "B"'s, 3 were "C"'s, and 5 were "D"'s. Although almost half of the participants of this study were in the "D" category and were also from suburban schools, the study mimics the national demographic trends currently occurring in the United States.[14] In order to maintain confidentiality, each school was coded without disclosing the school's actual test scores that are public knowledge. However, each school fell into its specified score range by two or more percentage points.

The portraits that follow were written to best describe how the participant and her/his role as principal have or have not changed since the inception of the MCAS. Each principal had her/his own account to relate to me as we discussed my topic and questions. The descriptions of their responses are necessary in order to fully understand the complexities associated with their jobs, MCAS, Education Reform and their personal ideals as educators. While Danielson's study of principals in North Carolina included case studies "in order to better understand the perceptions of each principal" (p.35, 1999), other researchers prefer to include complete transcripts of the qualitative interviews (Turner, 2001). Rather than include all of the information attained during the interview process, I have chosen to extract relevant information from the interviews in order to provide the reader with a "portrait" of each participant. Although chapters five and six will examine the interrelationships between each principal's responses in order to draw out themes and issues concerning MCAS, the principal profiles offered in this section

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[14] The September/October 2002 edition of Principal shares demographic information obtained from the National Center for Educational Statistics. The number of elementary/middle school principals is about 60,000. Of that number, 28,000 are from suburban schools, 16,000 from rural and 16,000 from urban.

allow the reader to understand each individual participant in this study. As such, the following "portraits" will allow the reader to become better acquainted with each principal prior to chapters V and VI where analysis occurs.

This chapter is separated into four sections with each of the four categories, "A, B, C and D" representing each section. The first section will begin with the lowest scoring category, "A", and the chapter will conclude with the highest scoring category "D." This order was chosen in order to provide a systematic manner of description and assist to more clearly define the differences between high and low performing schools. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants and their categories.

Table 1: Principal Categorization Table

Suzanne Jenkins	Urban School District	MCAS Category A
Barbara Cooper	Urban School District	MCAS Category A
George Oscar	Rural School District	MCAS Category B
Donald Meyer	Rural School District	MCAS Category B
Eileen DeMarco	Suburban School District	MCAS Category C
John Hobbs	Urban School District	MCAS Category C
Carla Depattie	Suburban School District	MCAS Category C
Michael Stone	Suburban School District	MCAS Category D
Kevin Pinard	Suburban School District	MCAS Category D
Karl Hanover	Suburban School District	MCAS Category D
Janine Bellamy	Suburban School District	MCAS Category D
Cliff Martin	Suburban School District	MCAS Category D

Category A

Suzanne Jenkins

Suzanne Jenkins is the principal of a large, new K-6 school in an urban setting. She has been the principal of the school since it opened its doors five years ago. Prior to her current appointment, Suzanne was the principal for several years of a small neighborhood school within the same district.

Suzanne feels that her staff is "well-prepared and diligent" about making sure that students are held accountable to high expectations, both academically and socially. Her leadership style lends itself to supporting the needs of the teachers, especially since she feels strongly about her staff. The teachers are encouraged by Suzanne to foster their own creativity within the confines of both her district curriculum and the Mass. Curriculum Frameworks. She refuses to let the MCAS scores "get to" her teachers and does not discuss MCAS with them unless it is in preparation for the actual administration of the test: "I tell them not to worry about it." She emphatically states:

> I can walk into a classroom at anytime on any day and there are always people on task, always. Yet, they'll have kids who might not do well on the MCAS exam and they just chastise themselves over and over again because they don't feel they've done a good job. There is something wrong there and I think….I have to work hard to boost their morale to keep them from feeling bad about themselves. It would be different if you had a person and they weren't doing their job and then fine. But these people….. I have just a phenomenal staff!

Suzanne's role as a buffer between the test scores and the teachers has added yet another dimension to her already complex position.

When discussing the MCAS, Suzanne definitely has mixed feelings about its usefulness as an assessment instrument as well as the toll it takes on her school and students. Suzanne thinks that the MCAS has "in some ways" been "very effective" in

evaluating student achievement. She believes that it is a "valuable tool" when it is used to guide the school to make curricular improvements, especially in the areas of math and language arts, both of which were taught "loosely" before the implementation of the test. Although the Curriculum Frameworks were in place before the existence of the MCAS, she states that the test obligated her teachers to align themselves with the curricular requirements of the state and district. She does believe that since its beginning, the MCAS:

> ....really hasn't changed us in any way other than, again that we make sure that the frameworks are being addressed, that the curriculum of the district are addressed, and we just get a little more intense during MCAS testing, and in a lot of ways the programs and learning that we do get shutdown for two weeks.

Conversely, she questions the State's motive in having students with Individualized Education Plans take the exam, especially the alternate assessment, since a sizeable portion of her students are on IEP's. Suzanne's school also houses a district program for students with severe special needs, many of whom are unable to communicate or function above that of "a 7 or 8 month old." In order to fulfill her MCAS requirements, she must produce portfolios for the alternate assessment students based upon the strands within the curriculum frameworks at their assigned grade levels and not on their IEP's. She has "been in several meetings with people from the DOE trying to have them advocate to have this changed" especially since she will have several students in the coming years mandated to have portfolios prepared. Though she believes in the "checks and balances" associated with accountability, she is angered when students who function at such a basic level are held to the state standards and not the goals found in their IEP's. She gives an example of a boy in her school who:

> has multiple disabilities and syndromes and when he came here he couldn't even say "hello." The other day he said good morning to me and have a good day Mrs. Jenkins. Now that is nowhere in a framework. For that child to be able to do that is like someone scoring perfectly on the SAT's. You know, give me a portfolio based on the goals of an IEP and we will give you primary sources of examples.

The idea of accountability for such a student is important for Suzanne as long as individual accomplishments are also recognized.

Suzanne repeatedly states that she believes that there is too much emphasis placed on test scores. She spends a great deal of time "trying to ease parents'" minds if they see their child in the needs improvement or warning categories" in order to make sure that the parents believe that the school is performing adequately. Suzanne does not like the fact that students and schools are "labeled" predominantly by their test scores rather than a compilation of the learning progress made by a student. With an emphasis placed on media literacy, she has had students develop and present media presentations to the district's school committee, which included video and Powerpoint presentations. She reiterates that their work "isn't going to show up on any MCAS test" and even her most "technologically sound kid" scores "at the bottom of the scale on MCAS." Suzanne believes that state testing should be used as a "guide and a way for schools to assess themselves but I don't think it should be the only criteria used to assess a school" and that "tests are really only one factor."

Suzanne uses her test score results in a variety of ways including to guide her professional development and ultimately change the way teaching occurs in her school. She and her staff were displeased with the scores from the first set of 4th grade MCAS scores in language arts several years ago. She hired an outside writing consultant to assist them with teaching students how to ultimately perform well on both the long essay

and the open-response questions. Her language arts scores soon surpassed those of her district and she is no longer concerned with "horrible" writing scores. Suzanne comments on the writing process that has now become integrated into every grade level that "it is just fascinating to see the 4th grade kids do the long essay. They sit down, get their paper, make a graphic organizer. It is so second nature to them that it is not even a concern anymore." She is now working toward instituting a professional development plan for math since she feels that "our math scores weren't where they needed to be with how much energy and effort" they have placed into their math program.

Suzanne feels that her job has been transformed since the onset of the MCAS. In order for her to continue to do her job effectively she "has a lot more paperwork" associated not only with the administration of the testing but also with accountability required by her district. Prior to MCAS, Suzanne would glance at information and memorandums sent to her by the state and district. She now "reads everything that comes from the state" and reviews her school improvement plan regularly with her staff and school council. During faculty meetings, Suzanne now focuses on "making sure that we are on task, that we are following the frameworks," and frequently invites consultants to the meetings to work with her staff.

Although Suzanne's scores are above her district average, she feels that her community will continue to perform below the state average regardless of the amount of emphasis being placed on test preparation. In a school such as Suzanne's, with over 50% of the student population on free or reduced lunch, "compared to a Concord, no matter how well we do, we're never going to look that good." When speaking about scores, she concentrates on her district rather then the state. Although she believes the test "really

does pit one school against the other and one community against the other," she remains "collegial" with other principals in her district even though they "really want to beat each other's scores."

Barbara Cooper

Barbara Cooper has been the principal of her large, urban elementary school since it was initially built 5 years ago. She has been an educator for over 25 years and enjoys the diversity of the city school system in which she works. Barbara has been an ardent supporter of education reform and feels that there is a place for MCAS in Massachusetts's schools.

MCAS has been the catalyst for the changes Barbara has made to her professional development program over the past several years. She has used her two in-service days to "beef up" her math curriculum since her scores have been so low. She also meets with her teachers regularly at staff meetings to review various curricula areas that are termed "weak." Barbara has also been "grappling" with the fact that her teachers need more than just curriculum review for staff development. Several of her teachers attended a workshop by a behavior specialist and pleaded with Barbara to have the person provide a workshop for the entire school. Barbara has contracted the specialist for her October release day but is "feeling like should I do this? Can I waste time on that?" She does not deny that the workshop will be beneficial but is concerned that her time should be spent on curricular needs.

Barbara has been pleased with her city's attempt to assist schools with preparing for the MCAS. She utilizes the district's curriculum, which now include benchmarks for

the various grade levels. Prior to the benchmarks, Barbara says teachers were overlapping what they were teaching because they were focusing on a strand that covered more then one grade. She finds the curriculum frameworks helpful but has "really been working off of the (district's) curriculum," since it breaks the strands down by grade level.

Even though Barbara feels that the MCAS reflects her school's priority for instruction, she feels that the test is "much too difficult for what we should be testing." She finds the test to be, "tricky, difficult, overwhelming to kids, and very discouraging- too many tricks. Are we looking to trick kids or are we looking to find out if they have the basic skills? And I don't think the MCAS is the answer." Barbara would much rather have her students take a nationally normed, standardized test that is "much more reliable." She continues,

> I don't feel as though the tests are appropriate for assessing students. I think they (MCAS) are too difficult. Smart, good kids that we know are doing well and other assessment pieces are showing good progress and the MCAS results aren't necessarily strong.

The "negative" reaction that she has for MCAS is accompanied by at feeling that it "has raised the bar." She feels that students are "getting a much more rigorous course of learning now then they did a few years ago," which is a "positive" aspect of MCAS. She likens the MCAS to a "double-edged sword," since it has both increased the standards but also the "anxiety about this test." Barbara has students get so frustrated with the test that one student decided to, "throw his desk over and not do it."

Barbara believes that the daily work in the school has changed since MCAS testing arrived. Her teachers now find themselves teaching units specified for a defined

grade level by the curriculum benchmarks established through her district. No longer do they have time to do their "favorite little unit because you've got all those materials that you've been collecting for 20 years." Barbara also finds that her teachers are "teaching and planning and doing daily lesson plans by the frameworks and covering materials that are in the frameworks."

Barbara uses the results of the MCAS to guide her school improvement plan which in turn guides the learning occurring in her school. She explains that when the results are returned in the fall they:

> …take those results, analyze them by multiple choice questions versus open-response questions, by subject area and even after how many kids are in a category but two points away from the next (category). Then we develop our school improvement plan based on that with specific achievement objectives like we are going to raise the open-response average from 4.3 to 4.5. We don't really use the test results that specifically, you know, like a 1:1 case basis, but on a building wide basis.

The building based plan assists Barbara in directing her teachers to refine their subjects around areas of weakness and pinpoint areas of strength.

In terms of assessment, Barbara would prefer a "basic skills type of test" rather then the MCAS. She would like to "give every kid an Iowa," and then chart their individual progress from one year to another. Barbara feels that if a child has shown growth from one year to the next then educators are accomplishing their jobs. She is especially leery of the alternate assessment program for some Special Education students. Barbara expresses disbelief that her students who require the alternate assessment do not pass unless they are at grade level. "Well, why are they on an alternate assessment?" she states.

Barbara also feels that there is too much pressure put on students, teachers and administrators to do well on the MCAS yet she feels schools should be held accountable. She says that teachers and students are "working harder" because "people are expecting more." Barbara reflects upon the amount of time it takes for the testing process to occur and that she loses teaching time while the students are being tested, "…when you think about how much time, number one, is spent testing and packing tests and bubbling and teaching to the test….I don't know…in one way it is really raising the bar."

Category B

George Oscar

George Oscar is a principal who has held a variety of posts over the past several years. He recently took a position as the principal of a K- 5 school in a small rural community. He has served as either the assistant or building principal of six schools in the past twelve years. George enjoys his new school because it is small (less then 250 students) and the superintendent affords him more autonomy as principal.

The school in which George works has had difficulty with preparing students for the MCAS since they continue to alter their curricula in order to better align themselves with the state frameworks as well as attempt to meet the needs of an impoverished community. He has worked carefully with his staff and school council on reviewing the MCAS scores to assess the "impact" his teachers have had on student progress. George recently put together a subcommittee of his school council comprised of parents, teachers and community members to "look collectively" at the test scores. Since his community is

economically strained, he is especially interested in having his parents partake in this venture:

> I've always felt parent's role in a school helps us to be doing our very best work because of their high stakes in this process. The more dysfunctional school systems or the families you work with, the extraneous issues like attendance, bed times, nutrition are going to drive a lot of those issues. So it becomes a broader, more global concern than just instruction.

George works closely with his staff, social services, and the community in raising the expectations for his students. With the routines that they continually model in school about behavior, study habits and working diligently toward achievement, George hopes that some of that transfers back to home. He notes:

> They have low expectations for their own children and themselves. Not a lot of aspirations for college or professional work. Multi-generational problems are very common. Crime is multi-generational. Poverty is multi-generational. Government assistance as a lifestyle is also.

Taking the community's needs and expectations into perspective, George has developed a sound understanding of the direction his school requires in order to ultimately perform well on the MCAS exam.

George feels fortunate that his school district does not use MCAS as a "make-it or break-it," tool. Since many of the schools in his district are performing well below the state average, with one being put on probation by the state, he feels that there are other issues working against all of the schools. Currently, with no incentives or disincentives tied to MCAS scores, George's district is "struggling with more primitive issues such as adequate funding, space, safety and public support for schools, other than MCAS."

His school stresses "fundamentals," and he has "applied a lot of resources toward effective literacy instruction," in order to develop a core curriculum that supports his student population. Without a district based standardized assessment system (it was

discontinued for lack of funding), George relies upon "frequent curriculum based measurement," to gauge student achievement. He feels they do a "good job chasing," the students who require extra assistance but still misses the consistency associated with a national normed standardized test.

George contends that the school district in which he works is further negatively labeled when the test scores are released. He feels that the impact it has on a school such as his is "horrific" because it "creates a mentality, that while it's true that the rich get richer because it is a self-fulfilling prophecy that if you live in a rich town then you can afford good schools and you produce rich and smart kids." He continues:

> That dichotomy is further pushed in the wrong direction by the public attentiveness to MCAS scores. While I don't fault the high performing districts that advertise that, it does not mean that those schools that are poor and not performing should be made public spectacles of that with no real serious system for remediation....There is not enough money to do a lot of anything and it doesn't address the inequities in funding.

He shuns the idea that the Foundation Formula equalized systems throughout the state because he continues to serve a population requiring more than the "88%" of the district's budget that is state funded.

In his district, the pressure to produce better MCAS scores has been minimal. Since there is no budget for professional development, his teachers have self-directed programs that may or may not address issues of assessment and instruction delivery. George's superintendent asks that he, "go light on that pressure," and not create "anxiety," for either teachers or students. It is a delicate balance because he does not want his students or parents to feel that they do not have to do well on MCAS because it is not important. Although he relies upon the "teachers intimate knowledge of the

student," for a more complete assessment of who the student is, George continues to take MCAS "lightly" and hopes his students and teachers do "not succumb to the pressure."

George deals with the many issues facing his students, including MCAS, on a day-to-day basis. Many of the concerns he has for his school relate back to the student population he serves. According to George, MCAS "focuses on the essentials," which is exactly what his school attempts to do daily. He finally reflects that his community is, "Poorly endowed, intellectually deprived, economically poor, socially and culturally deprived families sending kids to a place to learn. They are all in tough shape from the beginning."

Donald Meyer

Donald Meyer has been the building principal of his K-3 school for the past year. Donald's school is located in a rural area of the state that was unaffected by the economic prosperity of the last decade. He has been an administrator for the past 15 years, holding both assistant and principal positions at the elementary and middle school levels. Since he is new to his current position, in his discussion he refers to other posts he has held over the past several years.

Donald remains satisfied with the amount of emphasis being placed on the MCAS exam, especially at the elementary level. In his last school, a Kindergarten through 8th grade, he was especially cognizant of the varying degrees of pressure teachers placed on themselves throughout the assorted grade levels. Donald feels that his current staff is "a little more accepting" of the test. He does not "hear as much negativity" as he did "maybe a year or two ago."

Although he supports the current amount of emphasis placed on MCAS he questions how the scores are interpreted. Donald wants to ensure that schools are not "doing testing purely for the basis of achievement to get the highest score possible at any cost. Then they (DOE) are missing the boat." He feels that the cynicism he has witnessed in his schools is a natural reaction to the schools and students not achieving the "highest scores." He states:

> I think we are still too focused on purely the highest score and no matter to what means we get there, the end result is all we care about and I think that is wrong. We should be using it (MCAS results). The test should be one part of what one student is trying to become: a truly good student. Performance is certainly important, but not at the expense of the love of learning and creativity.

Donald also notes that the anxiety levels associated with the MCAS from school to school and town to town differ based upon the community demographics. His current parent population has "somewhat low expectations" for the children to succeed on MCAS. In his last school, parents were "very anxious" about the test results, ultimately only focusing on the final product: the score. He is concerned that some principals have made drastic modifications to their schools curricula in order to appease parents, school boards, superintendents and the public. Donald feels that as "MCAS continues to evolve it becomes more accepted into society," thus scores may be viewed "more realistically" in terms of socio-economic standing from one district to another.

Donald believes the role of the building principal has changed for the better because of MCAS. He feels that he is now "more focused on curriculum" than he had been in the past. Although his responsibilities have increased over the past ten years, Donald does not bemoan his ever-changing position saying that it has made him more aware of what is being taught in the classroom. He admits that curriculum was not his

forte before the MCAS and he has made a conscious effort to become more aware of what is being taught in each classroom. Donald now looks "for instructional practices that reflect the frameworks" and "what actual curriculum is being taught and happening in the classroom."

As the principal of a K-3 school, Donald feels less pressure to perform well on the MCAS than he did when he was principal of a K-8 building. In his former school, Donald was responsible for essentially two schools that were housed in the same building. The superintendent worked closely with Donald and the other district principal, often comparing the schools' scores with one another. Donald continues to feel "pressure" before MCAS scores are released but it has not been as stressful since he has fewer grades taking the test.

Although Donald feels that the outcomes associated with MCAS have been constructive, he does not agree with the public release of the test scores. Even though the only grade taking the MCAS in his school is third, he still feels that the school community, teachers and building administrator begin "to feel the pressure as soon as that time gets closer to the release in late fall and I don't think that a school can be neutral or can't be impacted by that." Donald readily admits:

> I do think that there is a tremendous amount of professional pressure and professional competition and not only in positive ways to see if your kids do better than your colleague's kids because you know the scores come back and are compared. My anxiety level rises as well. I realize that scores will be coming back and will be a direct reflection of my school, my perceived administrative capabilities. No matter how you feel you've been doing your job, the public release of those tests scores will impact you in some way.

When the test scores finally do arrive, "There is usually a collective sigh of relief," when the scores are "at least satisfactory or acceptable in some way. It does affect you."

Donald has used professional development to hone his teachers' skills in teaching writing and math. Although he has used much of his professional development to address pedagogical issues surrounding MCAS, his district has been less structured in its approach to implementing a succinct program. He has used his professional development to work with teachers on "MCAS related issues including open-ended questions, reading for comprehension and math." Donald says that his district is making a concerted effort to align all of the professional development across the district in order to "keep the district on the same page," especially given his active role in aligning professional growth with the MCAS.

While Donald has turned much of his attention toward making changes that will hopefully increase his test scores, he still feels that MCAS should be considered one type of student assessment. Donald is apprehensive about the stigma associated with good or poor test scores and stresses to his faculty, "There are so many different areas that go into student performance other than MCAS tests administered over a short period of time." He encourages his teachers to develop their own assessment systems that indicate other measurements of success, including portfolios, cooperative learning, and other alternate assessment techniques. Donald feels that "a lot of eggs are being placed in the basket in one period of time and I don't think it truly gives an indication of how kids can excel in other parts of the day that can't be measured on the test." Donald believes that MCAS has "merit" when measuring students against the "state picture," but he refrains from relying solely on the test to guide his school into the future.

Category C

Eileen DeMarco

Eileen is a long time educator who has been at her school for almost 15 years. During that time, Eileen served as the assistant principal for 13 years and more recently was asked to assume the position of principal. She is a strong advocate for both the students and teachers of her 600-pupil middle school.

The curriculum frameworks and MCAS have motivated Eileen and her staff to ensure that the students in her school are being taught relevant topics and information. She explains that, "We zone in on a daily basis with unit lesson plans that include benchmarks. The benchmarks reflect the standards and the strands of the curriculum." The professional development Eileen has provided for her teachers has also included several training days on standards based classrooms and differentiated instruction. Eileen explains that teachers,

> ....can't do like you did 30 years ago and say if they get it fine, if they don't fine. Those are the parts of education reform that I think are fair. The responsibility of the teachers should be more than that. You should be, as a teacher, responsible for trying to reach every different learning style of kid.

Eileen believes that the content of the MCAS has become, "our curriculum." She works with her department heads to assure that the information within the frameworks are being covered since it is her "first priority." Teachers have been allowed to continue their interdisciplinary units permitted they have been "tweaked," and apply to the frameworks. She complains that many of the frameworks have fluctuated from year to year that it is difficult for her to purchase the necessary materials, such as textbooks, to

support the curriculum. Even though her district has developed its own benchmarks, Eileen would not feel the "challenge" that she and her staff confront daily.

Although Eileen has implemented curricular changes to meet the demands of MCAS, she is troubled that Massachusetts expects success from 100% of the students. She is concerned that the "high standards" for all students does not take into account the life of the student before and after school. Eileen talks about students who, "go home and there is not a mom there and there is not a dad there and education is not reinforced." She mentions the graduation requirements and how the state is beginning to "back off," and become "more reasonable," and would like similar treatment of MCAS at lower grade levels.

Eileen doesn't support the public release of the test scores because it is "unfair to schools and teachers." She feels that the rank order of the schools by local newspapers forces schools that do not perform well to defend their professionalism. She states,

> This just isn't fair. We're getting killed. Let me tell you, as I talk with other principals about their staffs, questionable teachers, 5% or less of their staffs are questionable. I don't have any teachers in this building that I think are questionable. For the most part you have good teachers in education.

With the release of the scores, Eileen thinks that everyday citizens will get "bought into," the "negative public relations," despite the fact that she feels, "kids are learning more now at a younger age then they ever did." With such a negative effect on publicity, Eileen questions the motivation of the state in its decision to release the scores publicly.

Eileen has witnessed much of the daily work in her school change since MCAS was implemented. Daily lesson plans are now aligned with both her district's benchmarks and the state frameworks.

John Hobbs

John Hobbs is a first year building principal in a large urban school district. Prior to his current position he was the assistant principal in the same school for fifteen years. John's neighborhood school has a reputation for being one of the best school's in the city since his test scores have been much better than the city average.

John feels fortunate to be in a school that has done well on the MCAS. Although he is in an urban setting, he considers his school "fairly affluent," and many of his students "advantaged," therefore he usually does not "get a lot of surprises" when the MCAS scores are published. He remarks, "Our real bright kids do well. Our run of the mill kids struggle and it shows." John has used his MCAS scores to modify his school improvement plan to foster a systematic program that concentrates on students who are "on the cusp" between one MCAS category and another. There are students "who should do well, and do," and there are also the students who he focuses on in order to increase their knowledge base as well as their scores.

The public release of the test scores does not worry John since his school has traditionally done well on the test. He realizes that other schools' scores in his district are often much lower compared with his, but he also believes that the scores show that his "teachers work hard here." He explains that the public release of the scores "...makes us look good. Our parents come in and they are pretty much proud." John believes that since his faculty and students work toward higher standards for achievement then they should be rewarded for their efforts.

John has had little resistance from his staff about modifying professional development goals to improve MCAS performance. Since he has had long standing

relationships with a majority of his staff, he feels that he is able to converse with them about teaching methodology without being obtrusive. He tells his staff, "…if you're a veteran teacher and you've been teaching for 30 years, those (teaching) methods may not be working today." John has used standards based learning as the platform from which his professional development program is run and his teachers have been "willing to work differently," toward instituting the new system.

John feels comfortable with the accountability associated with MCAS scores. He understands that "If we're going to accept money from the state then obviously they're going to tell us how to use it and what to do." He questions how he would feel if he were in a different school, under more strenuous circumstances, but does not believe that the pressure is too great.

Carla Depattie

Carla Depattie has worked as principal of her K-8 school for the past three years. The town in which she works is small and extremely affluent. She left her former position as a central office administrator because she missed working with teachers and students on a daily basis. With almost twenty years of administrative experience, Carla is pleased to have returned to a principalship.

Carla believes that the MCAS has put more emphasis on "curriculum, accountability and best practices going on in the classroom." She has seen how teachers have changed their practices over the past few years to include more detailed assessments of student learning. Her teachers now "stand up a little straighter" and are "more

responsible about what is going on in the classroom." She does voice concern that teachers are too distressed over MCAS results as she states:

> It was funny. When I first came here everyone was gnashing their teeth and waiting for the scores to come out and was just like, 'Listen, they're important, but how you interact with kids and parents on a day to day basis is more important to me than these test scores.'

Carla's teachers remain committed to improving the test scores in the school and she continues to support them in their endeavor.

The level of anxiety that her teachers feel has forced Carla to deal with the issue in large group settings, such as staff meetings, as well as individual meetings with specific teachers. She will often pull teachers aside and talk about instructional practices and the MCAS. Carla uses staff meetings to ease the anxiety levels of her teachers so they do not shift their tensions to the students. She carefully shares information with her staff about MCAS and assessment, trying not to "force" the information onto them. Some of her teachers have even voiced concern over having certain students in their classrooms because they are afraid that the student's scores will drop the class average.

Even though she and her staff are careful not to misdirect their apprehensions about the test to the students, she admits that many of the students continue to feel uneasy about the test. She conveys a recent incident that occurred in her school when she "told them (teachers) to tell the kids to just do your best and your best is good enough for us" and a third grade student responded to one of the teachers with, "Yeah, but I won't graduate." The pressure that even the students place on themselves from "the teachers, parents, or media," to do well on MCAS forces Carla to remain vigilant when May arrives and testing encompasses the school for two weeks.

Carla uses the results of her MCAS scores to "evaluate the curriculum to see, if we are scoring low on a certain question then did we cover that? Is it in our curriculum?" Since a portion of her salary increase is dependent upon MCAS scores, she reviews the MCAS data and asks teachers "Did we teach it or did we not teach it? And if we didn't we better make sure we do it next time." The onerous job of perusing the MCAS results for grades three through eight is done solely by Carla. Since "administrators are rewarded for their results by monetary compensation," she feels her district places a great deal of credence on the MCAS test as a gauge for student achievement.

Although Carla feels that there is a place for accountability in her field, she does not believe that MCAS is the sole solution to educational reform. She would "like to see something…more like the MEAPS," that "reflected the school's curriculum compared against kinds of communities," and not individual students. She readily admits that:

> I would probably feel much more comfortable and it may just be me being naïve on my part but I think a Stanford, Metropolitan, or Iowa would serve the same purpose as this horrible MCAS thing. It is like test the kids on what they need to know to be successful and not on what the Board of Education feels is important. I would rather see kids graduate with basic skills as opposed to not graduating ……because they live in an urban setting and they can't pass the MCAS because they haven't had the opportunities.

Carla expresses that she was excited about the prospect of a national test. However, since learning that each state will be responsible for developing its own accountability system, she has been less enthusiastic about it. She feels that Massachusetts standards are so "high" for students that a national normed test would alleviate many of the issues associated with the MCAS. Carla protests, "you've got states on all ends of the spectrum instead of the national standards we adhere to. So would kids from Mississippi or Alabama be the same as kids from Massachusetts? No, but then why

are we doing national testing?" Carla believes that the only way President Bush was able to have his proposal passed was to allow states the flexibility of choosing their own assessment system as long as students at the specified grade levels are tested regularly.

Carla has been made aware of the public pressure to perform well on MCAS as she meets with the school committee on an annual basis to discuss MCAS scores for her school. She views the public release of the test scores as being "wrong," because "people start comparing us to other schools." Carla is not sure what the state gains from releasing the scores publicly other than to "embarrass or to let the voters know that we do take them (MCAS) seriously. She recalls an incident at a school committee hearing about her school's test scores:

> One of our school committee members go up at a public meeting and said that this is horrible and I can't believe you're putting a positive spin on your test scores....We should be the highest in the district. I said, 'Well, you know what? The parents send us the only kids they have. They aren't keeping the good ones at home. So we are doing the best we can with the kids we have.' But they have this mentality that every kid in (name of town) is bright and we should be doing much better.

Carla has also seen her test scores decrease slightly over the past few years. "The worse curse," she maintains, "is to do well the first year or two on the MCAS because there is no place to go but down. And if you drop, why did you drop? If you start at the bottom there is only one way to go: up."

In order for her to stay informed on state testing, Carla obtains most of her information from the DOE website. She says that "DOE has been very good about informing us about the MCAS – almost too much." She is often overwhelmed by the data she receives back from the state concerning her scores and feels that the "tons and

tons of paperwork and analysis that they do," is just too much for the state to analyze properly so it is given to the schools.

Category D

Michael Stone

As an experienced educator, Michael has served in every conceivable building administration position during his 32 years of service. He currently leads a middle school in a suburb of a large city. His students score extremely well on MCAS and he takes pride in his rising scores.

Michael spends a great deal of time reviewing data derived from his MCAS scores in order to have a better understanding of what his students are and are not doing well. He likes to track groups of kids and not compare eighth grade scores from year to year, "….you are comparing apples and bananas. They are not the same test group so whether or not you can establish comparative data between two completely different groups of kids taking different tests….I'm not sure of the validity of that." He meticulously reviews every item on the test with his administrative team, searching for patterns of correct and/or incorrect responses. Michael is especially pleased with the math test since it "gives us a real good overview of where we are in our building relative to where we are in the state." He has used the MCAS as a mechanism for improving instruction in math and language arts as he states:

> The kids we look at are the kids in the needs improvement category or failing – I refuse to call it warning because it is failing. I look at those two categories and I think who are these kids and how have they done as they have done. Administratively, I target numbers of kids out of classes and I review the questions that they answered and I look at how they did…..When I look at kids who have not achieved based upon where they are placed (within their classes) I

> try to determine why that is and what we've been finding is operationally our kids are very good....Where they don't score well is the darn open-ended questions where they have to explain the process.

Michael realizes that the open-ended response questions require not only the understanding of math concepts but also a basic knowledge of the writing process so that it becomes a "reading, writing, encoding and decoding problem." His detailed analysis of the math scores have led him to modify not only his math program but also his language arts curriculum to include portfolios that contain student writing samples. He believes that "it is helpful to proactively plan," a school's curriculum around the MCAS results.

While Michael feels that there are "issues" with having Special Education students take the test, he remains a staunch advocate of high standards and high stakes testing. He feels that "kids will rise to the level of expectations you have for them," and perceives the state to be lowering "the bar" in order to have more students succeed. He is unwavering in his defense of high academic standards because he wants all students to "stretch," and work harder at learning. He sees many students in his school as "regular kids who haven't done any work and have been passed on. Those are the kids who need to understand that there is a terminus." Michael thinks that the political pressure placed on the DOE about the high stakes nature of the MCAS forced them to "reduce the standard to where it doesn't matter at all now."

When speaking about the principalship, Michael believes that the education reform movement, including MCAS, has caused the position to become more complex than ever before. After witnessing the loss of tenure and the increase in responsibilities, Michael thinks that the autonomy of the past has been stifled. He notes, "Before, you

could have a building and put your personal stamp on it (the school)." Michael continues:

> Now you have to understand the curriculum, the assessment reflecting the curriculum, but more importantly you have to be able to develop the instruction to improve the delivery of the curriculum to enhance the assessment. That was just not a priority before.

He is concerned that it will become more challenging to find qualified educators willing to take on the responsibilities associated with the principalship. Although Michael feels that the elimination of tenure forced many inadequate principals to resign, he believes that one or two year contracts do not lend themselves to developing strong school leaders. Michael remarks, "If I were your age I would be looking in another area."

Michael also advocates for more assessment tools along with MCAS. He considers MCAS to be "one" aspect of assessing a student. Michael thinks that the MCAS if "used in conjunction with standardized test scores, achievement, teacher progress, and couch that in terms of behavior, social growth and interaction – looking at the whole kid, I think it gives you a piece of the puzzle." He is especially mindful of the social and emotional "growth" made by students at the middle school level. Michael seeks to "understand the kid" and realizes that items such as social and emotional growth cannot be measured with a standardized assessment as he states, "I don't know if one test will ever give you by itself a sense of the growth a kid has made."

With the inception of MCAS, Michael has used his professional development to further assist his teachers in terms of their instructional delivery. He believes that his school and district is aligned with the curriculum frameworks so he has chosen to focus his attention on the conveyance of instruction. He remarks:

> I think that all of this (varying instructional strategies) is MCAS driven so when you look at the biggest change that we've made it is really in the delivery of instruction because we've gotten the information and feedback on assessment which measure us against the standardized curriculum so the only thing we can really improve is the delivery of instruction and the focus of that instruction.

Michael has also worked with his staff on developing student success plans for those students in the warning category. Collectively, Michael and his teachers have written several specified plans that "target" the students individual needs. The classroom teachers then use a variety of instructional strategies to help the student understand what is being taught.

Kevin Pinard

Kevin Pinard has been an administrator in his school district for almost 30 years. Even though Kevin could have retired three years ago, he has chosen to remain at his 500 student K – 4 elementary school in a small rural town. He has been the principal of his school for 6 years and does not plan on retiring for several years.

Kevin takes great pride in the amount his MCAS scores have improved since testing began. He attributes the success of his school to the fact that "we are focused on achievement." For Kevin and his staff, "Not only does it (MCAS) reflect our priorities for instruction but it reflects our attitude toward testing. It reflects our in-service, our training, our budgeting. It really becomes your priority, it doesn't reflect your priority." Kevin believes that MCAS has become the driving force behind the myriad of changes he and his teachers have made at his school. He comments:

> You always think of testing. You always think of scoring. You always have to counsel teachers because teachers are really concerned, 'Well, I have this many kids who haven't done well and my testing program won't do well.' You spend a lot of your daily responsibilities in promoting an environment for good learning

> and making sure that teachers are comfortable and they are not nervous. They are as tuned in as anybody else. There is something usually on every faculty meeting agenda about testing of some sorts.

Since Kevin's school is a K-4, it is difficult for him to use the MCAS scores themselves to drive individualized instruction since his fourth grade students have moved on to the middle school by the time their results return. Although he offers all of his fourth grade students the opportunity to attend a before school MCAS program, he maintains that the MCAS results are difficult to "use to any great extent outside of the third grade reading scores....We know that 40 is the magic number on that test." Kevin utilizes the scores from the third grade test to highlight students who do well and students who struggle. He explains:

> For example, as a result of the emphasis on the third grade reading test, long reading passages followed by multiple choice comprehension questions, we have put SRA reading kits back into all of our first, second and third grade classrooms. Even in the reading there are a couple, not many, of the questions that have to be taught once again to physically write for a tester to read. So that has brought emphasis and the curriculum has changed. Handwriting has begun in first and second grade and then Benbow (cursive) in 3rd and 4th.

Kevin is comfortable making such modifications to the curriculum because "MCAS makes a lot of good sense to me."

Kevin believes that the amount of emphasis placed on MCAS forces principals to "want to do better." He says that when Education Reform began in 1993, "It was very scary at first, especially for the young principals," because principal unions were eliminated. He emphatically continues, "Whether it is right or wrong, that part of the law that makes the principal responsible for achievement that occurs or doesn't occur in his building is a dynamite tool." His school is currently "on a roll" and has "done very well" on MCAS. Kevin writes about his MCAS scores in his monthly newsletter to families

and also places information on the school website. He hopes to continue to prosper on the exam, but states, "If we go down again we'll hide. It is that kind of serious thing." He says that without MCAS:

> …how do you know you are doing well? How do you know how a kid is doing? For many, many generations we presumed we were doing well. We assumed that we were doing well. We didn't know. It was only in the last five years that we came back to any testing program at all. For generations we didn't have any testing at all until the kids took the SAT's at the high school level. So, MCAS has forced us to look at kids, look at what they are being taught, look at what they are learning.

Kevin systematically takes his MCAS results and uses them to compare teachers with teachers and classes with classes. He compares, "every single class, every teacher with district scores and with our own so that every teacher knows." During staff meetings, Kevin shares spreadsheets with his staff comparing scores and rating teachers. Kevin has taken the breakdown of the results one step further by defining areas of strength and weakness for individual teachers. When speaking of his school compared with other schools in his district Kevin doesn't think "any other school in the district, to my knowledge, puts as much emphasis in their program as I do."

Kevin admits that he "can see the flaw with MCAS testing in how it is going to universally judge kids," but is concerned that the state will continue "watering down" the test so that more students pass. He believes that because of the "inner-city kids" who continually "do poorly" on the exam, the state has already begun to modify the assessment system. Although he recognizes that city "school systems look poor compared to the suburbs," Kevin thinks that all students should be held to high standards and expectations.

Karl Hanover

Karl is a senior administrator in his school district with over twenty years experience as a building principal. He currently leads a K –5 school in an affluent section of a large suburb. Karl and his staff carefully attend to the academic needs of their students by refining the programs and assessment tools used in the school.

With years of experience, Karl understands that "assessment is one of the most critical factors in your instructional practice, your educational priorities, your curriculum priorities. What you are measured on will generate where you focus your time." He believes that assessment is the preeminent way in which a principal can augment what is being taught and how it is being taught. Karl's "philosophy" about testing and any other educational venture is that they all "do a vigorous job," on anything that they believe will assist students at becoming more academically focused.

Karl believes the MCAS has changed instruction for the better in his school and across the state. He finds that teachers are more focused teaching thinking and writing skills than they were before the MCAS. Since most of his teachers have more than ten years of experience, his staff has become more adept at assessing students and individualizing instruction based on their needs. Karl uses the term "control" to describe that manner in which a school must be run in order to be successful. He states about teaching:

> In this school there is something that you may absolutely love and you may share it well with kids. But if you consume too much of the school day in dealing with that and it is not related to the curriculum frameworks and the tools we are supposed to be teaching kids then I say, 'Sign yourself up to teach an after school program initiative…if you really have a need to teach that stuff but maximize the time spent in school that is focused on the curriculum.'

Karl had many teachers who "didn't know how to teach writing effectively," and he brought in-service programs to his school to rectify the issue. His school curriculum is based on the curriculum frameworks so he is comfortable "putting more time toward teaching to the test....because I think the test is there to measure the curriculum frameworks."

The pressure to perform well on MCAS has been minimal for Karl since he has scored in the top 10% every year but he does concentrate on providing the teachers with feedback. He has tried to "take the pressure off my teachers," by telling them that he has "4 years of data to support the fact the we know how to teach in ways that kids can accomplish stuff." Karl believes that everyone, especially teachers, needs to know how they are performing:

> I believe that feedback is the breakfast of champions. I am one that appreciates getting data and feedback and knowing what my batting average is and my ERA. I believe most teachers want theirs (MCAS scores) to be up there and when they see that it is then it reinforces what they are doing....if it doesn't then it makes them really look at what it is that they could change. It goes against the grain of keeping the status quo.

If his scores were to decrease, Karl says that he would refocus his attention on what students did poorly and how were they taught.

Karl does not rely upon the MCAS in isolation to make curricular decisions. Using items such as national standardized tests and teacher assessments, Karl compares MCAS scores against such items to provide a more "appropriate" assessment of a student. He is satisfied with the testing results from both math and language arts because the curriculum frameworks have been firmly established. He doesn't "think the state is satisfied with the science/technology or the history/social science," thus it is difficult for true measurement in those curriculum areas. Karl even contends that after using,

"internal analysis," he and his teachers have found that a "needs improvement," category is the equivalent of the "average," range on a national standardized test. "We do a lot of our own individual testing and assessment of those youngsters," he explains about his own diagnostic tools.

Karl understands that "there are some youngsters" who will not pass the MCAS but does not want to "water down" the standards. He states:

> I think the standards are there for schools and society to work toward and for kids to accomplish. I can say that easier in a school that doesn't have so high a level of family disorganization, environmental chaos, than a school where that would be an overwhelming component of the environment….I can rely on the fact that if my students put in an effort and my teachers teach to the level of their capability and knowledge, my kids can achieve the knowledge of the curriculum frameworks.

Karl believes that there will be very few students who ultimately fail MCAS if everyone is willing to work hard at preparing those students to do well. He is uncertain of how he would deal with those students and says, "they should still somehow be responsible to have completed the requirements of the school program."

Karl feels that many school across the state, "can be doing better than they are really doing," in reference to teaching to the curriculum frameworks. He thinks that many current educators have not been "educated themselves," or "aren't capable," to improve their instructional practices that eventually lead to "kids being able to accomplish their goals." Karl has used both his professional development days and his staff meetings to further instruct his teachers about such items as writing, reading and math.

Janine Bellamy

Janine is a senior administrator who has been in education for over 30 years. She has been the principal of her current school for 12 years, during which time a brand new school was built to accommodate the growing suburbs in her town. No longer a neighborhood school, the student body is socio-economically diverse with students attending her school from single-family homes and large apartment complexes. Although the students in attendance at her new school are less homogenous in terms of their socio-economic backgrounds than they had been in her previous building, Janine's school remains in the D category.

Janine has witnessed, firsthand, the cyclical nature of education. During her time as a principal in the 1980's, Janine was a fervent advocate of the Whole Language movement. By 1990, "we were in the process of throwing basal readers out the window and bringing in literature based programs." Although her school district had curricula for her teachers to follow, teachers were encouraged to "create their own curriculums" in order to meet the needs of emerging readers and writers. The programs were established from classroom to classroom with minimal consistency and "done in a relatively disorganized way." Janine further explains that:

> It was a good movement but again there wasn't a plan. There wasn't a way to check the effectiveness of whether or not this was a good program. So you can still run that program. You don't have to throw it out the window. You just have to build some things in it that nobody thought to build into it. Like anything with change, the hardest thing is to get moving. Well, we got moving and it went fast and furiously but it left some real important elements behind as it went. Again, I don't think you have to change that to get better. You just have to look at those kinds of things and make sure that you have good goals and objectives: good learning goals and objectives that are there. There is nothing wrong with making a kid a better reader and writer. The difference is now we are going to check it in a formal way.

Janine's ability to assimilate new educational practices has afforded her the opportunity to work with the current standards movement rather than against it. She considers Massachusetts' recent educational reform movement "right on target with what they are doing exactly," in terms of the high expectations for student outcomes.

The "loosely structured" quality of the curricula of the past 20 years led Janine to alter her own school's curriculum in the mid 1990's. Her modifications were spurred by the notion of the MCAS test that would be given to her fourth grade students. She reflects upon the time when she was searching for "a good comprehensive system" for assessment before the arrival of the MCAS. Janine suspects that schools that have a:

> .... loosely ordered system probably favors the top end of a group and the bottom end, which is exactly why MCAS has come about, the bottom end of the group are allowed to float. They are unclear about the expectations for them and what they get, they get, and what they don't, they don't. They mask it because they don't have clear standards when it comes time to assess.

In fact, Janine is working toward developing a standardized assessment process for reporting student progress. Her belief the "measurable criteria will lead to success," filters down to her staff where they are expected to "use those kinds of things" in order to provide her with salient information about the learning occurring in her school.

When MCAS was initially introduced, Janine had her doubts about the longevity of the assessment system. She spent a great deal of time "scrambling" to get her fourth grade teachers the information they needed to provide to the students before the actual test. Though she was immersed in preparing her teachers for the test, she also had "in the back of her mind the history was that it was going to change and it is going to change again and again," and eventually "may burn itself out in three years." She is glad the MCAS has remained consistent and believes that the addition of testing at various grade

levels other then fourth has "clearly shoved the curriculum down" so that "you no longer have the luxury of having a first grade curriculum looking like a kindergarten curriculum."

Janine is also aware of the "anxiety" that accompanies the test at every level because of the "public display" of the test scores in October. She complains that she often finds herself "banging on the teachers: c'mon you guys," as they attempt to deal with increasing their scores. Janine states, "if we could just find a way to make it a normal course of our operation," without the public release of the scores and the comparisons that accompany them, then she would feel more comfortable with the test. The pressure felt by administrators and teachers to have students perform well is what Janine does not want to be carried over to the students. Invariably, the "undue emphasis" placed on the results of the test effects even her best students. She mentions her fourth grade students taking the long composition who "were really uptight and this effects their ability to perform well and not through lack of experience and exposure to things that look like that through the year." Her preference would be that "it was just a little bit more subdued and yet not put on the back burner." Janine is searching for a balance between accountability and the tension associated with state mandated testing.

Janine has stressed improving the writing and math scores in her professional development plans for her teachers but she still feels that they need more practice developing adequate assessment tools for classroom use. She spends "a lot of time developing a writing process across all grade levels, two or three times a month where we meet as a whole staff to learn about the rubric and get everybody on the same page." They often find "gaps" in their program when they periodically review what is being

taught at the various grade levels. She is often discouraged by her teachers' lack of understanding around the design and implementation of unit plans that include "the right assessment pieces." Janine explains:

> I have to teach my teachers that they are going to write an assessment because they don't know, and then assess what?....Ok, where do I start? Where do I begin and how do I try to teach people?.....Educational leadership is very frustrating because I don't know where to begin. Do I do an assessment blueprint? Well, I don't know if people are ready for that.

Although she is frustrated by this, Janine remains confident that her staff will soon align their own assessment tools with those of the MCAS.

Cliff Martin

Cliff has been the principal of his 550-pupil elementary school for the past two years. Prior to this position, Cliff served as the building principal of another local elementary school for 22 years. His school has performed well on MCAS for the past four years, even though it has had three different principals during that time.

While Cliff's school continues to score high of the MCAS, he finds many aspects of MCAS to be inequitable. One of Cliff's main contentions is that schools are the only party responsible for student success on the assessments. He proceeds to break down the time students are actually in school:

> The state requires a minimum of 180 days in a school year. That is almost half (of 365). So you've got half of a calendar year when kids are in school. And out of that half year we've got the kids for 6 hours for instruction. And 6 hours is ¼ of a 24 hour day. So 18 hours those kids are some place else. So when you have a 4:1 ratio, the ¼ people are working pretty damn hard with these kids. So what is going on the other 18 hours? Who are they with? What are they doing?

Cliff is aware that the state has expended millions of dollars on education reform and expects some type of assessment, but concludes "we should go for the big picture and

look about those other factors where the kid spends a majority of his or her time." Cliff believes that most of society has a difficult time being introspective and people do not welcome change if it affects them.

Cliff has strong reservations about the public release of the test scores. He feels that when the scores are released publicly, both the media and the general public view the scores as a "reflection…on the quality of instruction and have nothing to do with student achievement which is totally contrary to education reform. Totally contrary." His belief is that education reform calls for multiple tools for assessment and the state has neglected its commitment to a variety of assessment measures. One reason why Cliff thinks that only the MCAS has been utilized thus far is that the other assessment measures, such as portfolios, can't be compared from school to school or town to town. He remarks, "I don't think they have a newspaper with enough pages in it to print it all."

Since becoming principal, Cliff has used the MCAS, and other standardized tests and informal assessments to evaluate how effectively his school is educating students. He relies heavily upon the nationally normed standardized testing given to all of his students since the results are returned sooner and "you don't have to deal with" other issues with, "the state such as wrong answers on questions." He finds that his teachers use the MCAS results as "appetizers," for collegial conversations about curriculum and best teaching practices. They discuss how their students performed and review what areas need further refinement before the next testing session. His "whole school takes on the responsibility for the good scores and the not-so-good scores," often working across grade levels and areas of interest and specialty.

Cliff admits that some of his professional goals are tied to how well his school performs on MCAS, but he refuses to let his teachers know that. He feels that he is ultimately the one person who is responsible for the success or failure of students and says, "My job is to protect the teachers." Cliff wants his teachers to feel comfortable about the curriculum and testing, especially in the months of April and May when the testing occurs.

When talking about MCAS, Cliff feels it is important to remember that it should be a gauge for student growth and achievement against him/herself and not compared with others. He unwaveringly defends his line of reasoning:

> I think it is important when looking at any standardized assessment, be it MCAS or whatever, that you look at it longitudinally. There is nothing to do with comparing teachers. It has nothing to do with comparing towns. This is about individual children. Like I said, no parent wants his kid compared with another. So let's do longitudinal studies where we compare them to themselves with the goal of trying to make them a little better from year to year. It is pretty simple. That is what education is all about. Put that in your Boston Globe.

Cliff fears that the public perception of Massachusetts' schools is dependent upon MCAS scores. Ultimately, he feels that the MCAS "evaluates teachers teaching," rather then student achievement.

The following chapter will review responses to each question individually and will align principals answers into more generalized responses. From those generalized responses and the themes mentioned above, the final chapter will conclude with a summary of the findings.

CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Within the study, all interviewees were asked 12 questions relating to the impact of the MCAS on their responsibilities as principals. The questions ranged from examining priorities for instruction to the messages conveyed to teachers about the MCAS. As specified in Chapter 3, the first five questions were derived from Dave Brown's study of principals' perceptions of standardized testing and were used verbatim. The last seven questions were geared toward the MCAS and were more specific than the first five. All of the participants chose to answer every question and thoroughly reviewed their responses after being transcribed for the member check.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the various responses provided by the study participants. I will be examining the patterns observed among respondents, identifying the similarities and differences found within each designated question. While each respondent offered her/his own perspectives on the topic of high stakes testing, there were many overlapping statements from the principals that reinforced the commonalities that they all share.

Although all of the participants were questioned in the same sequence, the following analysis will not necessarily be in the sequential order in which the questions were originally posed. As data was reviewed and analyzed, some responses were more likely to meld into other responses because certain questions were viewed more globally. Other responses were very specific and could only be aligned with one particular query.

Question 1. (Does the content of the state test reflect your priorities for instruction?)

Even though there were some concerns about the MCAS not reflecting true instructional priorities, the curriculum frameworks became the focal point for respondents and were integrated into most of the replies to this question for several reasons. First, in order for schools to perform well on MCAS, they must follow the curriculum frameworks from which the MCAS is derived. Secondly, the principals understand that, although the frameworks are not mandated, the MCAS tests are. Lastly, the curriculum frameworks have given schools direction and a common framework from which to function, with which I believe many administrators are content.

Massachusetts has attempted to level the academic playing field, giving every school the same basic curricular outcomes to enlist. Unlike some other states, Massachusetts has decided not to mandate the curriculum. Instead every student in the public school system must be assessed based on the curriculum frameworks. Issues arise if principals, such as Carla, find that they do not agree with the frameworks and her students are tested on subjects to which they were not exposed.

Following David Brown's study (1993), the first question posed to all of the principals concerned the impact of the state test on instructional content taught within Massachusetts schools. A majority of the interviewees responded to this question affirmatively, stating that the MCAS test is indeed synonymous with their instructional priorities. For most principals, the curriculum frameworks are followed to insure that MCAS scores are adequate. According to Michael Stone, the MCAS structures the instructional goals of his school in a way that leads to accountability. He asserts:

> What the state is asking us to do is all good stuff. It focuses on student discovery, explanation, rationalization, and creative problem solving; all positive, good things. The frameworks are the first common structure that we've had in education. I think making us accountable for the teaching and work to be done really helps to solidify and target the goals that you have. Yes, they do reflect my priorities for instruction. I can't think of a single thing that is tested or a single expectation that the state has that is not good instructional strategy.

Other principals echo Michael's sentiments in that they believed that the MCAS directly impacts the school's instruction. John Hobbs concurs with Michael as he states, "I feel they [MCAS] go along with the state frameworks which in turn we follow," while Janine Bellamy asserts, "I think the content of the state test sets your priority for instruction." She adds:

> I think over the four or five years that we've been doing this test we may have had other priorities and that needed to be brought into line with the content of the state test. I think our goals have always been to help kids read, write and compute and this certainly changes the focus of exactly what they ought to be learning about in reading, writing and math.

Thus as Janine explains, although the goals for learning have remained consistent within her school, the MCAS has channeled the school's learning outcomes into specific objectives related to the curriculum frameworks. Kevin Pinard attests to Janine's belief as he remarks, "Not only does it reflect our priorities for instruction but it reflects our attitude toward testing. It reflects in-service, our training, our budgeting. It really becomes your priority; it doesn't really reflect your priority." Kevin takes Janine's statement a step further in suggesting that the objectives tested on MCAS are fully integrated into his school's educational philosophy.

Likewise, Cliff Martin finds that the test reflects his priority for instruction. However, he takes a decidedly more direct approach in his response:

> The content of the state test has become, very much, our curriculum. The whole premise of MCAS and education reform is, although not overtly, covertly, to

> develop a state curriculum. And you can say it any way you want but it is a state curriculum. My first priority with our teachers in September and when I talk with them during release time days…I hold up the nine booklets, the state frameworks, and say, 'These must be taught. Period.'

Such a pointed reply indicates that for principals like Cliff, the MCAS does not necessarily guide or focus each school's curricula; rather it becomes the all-encompassing curriculum that guides student instruction during the given year.

Principal Donald Meyer has a similar opinion to Cliff's in that he believes the MCAS reflects his school's priorities for instruction, "my priorities," and that "it [MCAS] has finally begun to address the issue of what we should be teaching or are teaching and we should be assessing what we are." Like Cliff, Donald questions the state's objective in terms of the curriculum frameworks but continues to remain pleased with the concept of the state assessment system:

> There may be some questions about either the intent or the content of the test in the long run but I do think it does reflect. I feel more comfortable with the fact that we are trying to address through assessment what we are teaching through instruction and it is about time.

Donald is pleased with a test that assesses his curricular objectives. Without clearly defined curricula, what was taught at the various grade levels prior to Education Reform was left to the discretion of individual school boards, superintendents, principals and teachers.

For principals like George Oscar and Barbara Cooper, whose test scores fall below average, they agree that their instructional priorities are reflected in MCAS. Coming from an economically strained school system in need of curricular guidance, George appreciates that MCAS "focuses on essentials." Similarly, Barbara finds that her district, "developed curricula that jibed with the whole state frameworks," so the testing

serves as documentation of what each student is supposed to be learning. This function of the test is a benefit for schools seeking to maintain direction for individual students and the school as a whole.

While most principals seem to welcome the instructional guidance offered by the MCAS, others express reservations about its effect. Two of the participants, Carla Depattie and Eileen DeMarco, have mixed feelings about their own school's priorities in reference to state testing. Carla finds that, "there is too much emphasis, especially with the MCAS data, on Social Studies. Too much emphasis on dates and on very detailed information as opposed to knowing the time era." However, she believes that tested subjects such as English Language Arts and Math are, "more in line with the process and critical thinking as opposed to rote facts." Eileen, who feels that schools are held accountable for students even though they are only in the school setting for a minimal amount of time, explains that the test only partly reflects her priority for instruction:

> The frameworks provide a framework of teaching children in part what they need to know. The issue then becomes does the MCAS test on what kids need to know and I think that distinction needs to be made. In part, basic skills, serving as a guide for the continuum of learning for young kids, connection from one year to the next for instruction. Staff and teachers having an understanding of what they are accountable for, as well as what principals are accountable for. And the "for" is for teaching. I don't think those parties are the exclusive shareholders for learning.

Accordingly, for Eileen, the impact of the MCAS on instruction was only one aspect of student learning. While it serves the purpose of tracking student progress from year to year, it did not exclusively account for the student's comprehensive learning experience. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Eileen believes that many factors contribute to a child's learning, including a host of socio-cultural elements. Therefore,

the MCAS serves as an assessment tool specific to the curriculum frameworks without necessarily accounting for other learning variables.

Karl Hanover reinforces Eileen's belief in considering the test's impact on student learning. While he is confident that the MCAS "content matches up with my priorities quite well," he clarifies that the test is "not everything, the be all and end all." He is comfortable with the notion that test-guided instruction is a means to "measure out the knowledge and skills that we think that kids should obtain in our schools." Yet like Eileen, he remains committed to the belief that instruction entails lifelong learning skills, such as "character development," which are not reflected in the test. As Eileen and Karl assert, the "priorities" for instruction are not necessarily translated to priorities for a child's well-rounded education which includes non-academic elements vital to creating a socially responsible student.

Although the MCAS does not address all aspects of learning, it nevertheless serves as a motivational force for improving instructional effectiveness regarding the curriculum frameworks. For Karl, while the initial objectives and standards of the test were "at a higher level than what we could really match up with," he maintains that:

> …we are now teaching things that we should be teaching in school as a result of it and I don't think we would have gotten to this point without it because it would have taken years and we still wouldn't be at that point where we are with people teaching the way they are teaching now so that the youngsters would be capable to take the MCAS.

As Karl explains, "assessment is one of the most critical factors in your instructional practice, your educational priorities, your curriculum priorities." Such a response highlights the pragmatic nature of the MCAS in the sense that principals must

align their own curriculum with that of the state in order to develop a successful program of study for their schools.

Question 2. (How effective have these state tests been in evaluating student achievement? How much do you rely on these tests in making decisions concerning students? Are these tests appropriate for assessing students in each of the subject areas taught?)

Despite some variances in how the principals utilize the MCAS for assessment, most responses indicate the belief that, although the test serves to assess the curriculum frameworks, it does not provide a comprehensive analysis of student achievement. For several principals, the test serves as a stronger indicator of teacher performance than that of student learning.

Education Reform came to fruition in 1993 in order to improve the state of education in Massachusetts. Achievement testing is a portion of education reform that has been both welcomed and contested by educators. In turn, when asked this multi-layered question, principals' responses varied from one school to the next but were bound by a common theme: MCAS is only one form of assessment. Respondents such as Michael, whose scores were in the D category, thinks the MCAS is a "pretty good tool," in assessing student achievement, as long as it is not used in isolation. He continues, "When I look at that (MCAS) I think in conjunction with other test data that we have I find them very helpful." Using the MCAS results in unison with other assessment tools, Michael is able to have a more "representative" view of the student:

> But when I started to look at weaknesses and I looked at weak areas, some of the things that showed up for me were we didn't answer our open response questions

well. That is an area that we lost a great many points and our achievement in that was down in anywhere around the 185 to the 225 area out of 400 possible points. So when I look at that, I thought why would that be? But then I was able to look at my Metropolitan Achievement scores and look at my overall reading and my overall writing composition scores and said that was why. It made sense when I looked at what was missing from my MCAS scores in light of the weaker areas I found in my Metropolitan scores. So it was able to help me identify things. I think anytime you use any one measurement or one instructional technology tool too dependently I don't think you get a real good idea of where you are. I think used in conjunction with classroom achievement, all the measures that we have in our building, all the measures that we have from standardized testing, I think then you get a good profile. These tests are not standardized and normed tests. They are referenced tests and they refer to specific curriculum so they are a whole different look at the same picture we have always looked at. When I look at that I think in conjunction with the other test data that we have I find them very helpful.

With these concerns in mind, Michael is one of many building principals who employs a variety of measurement tools and assessments to gauge student achievement, and does not rely exclusively on MCAS. To form a "profile," of a student, his school depends upon a myriad of assessments and is not confined to only one.

Like Michael, Eileen does not agree, "with the one sidedness of the one test aspect." She feels that the test has been somewhat "fair" for students in her school but it may be biased against others. She states:

> I don't agree with the one sidedness of the one test aspect. I think there should be other ways of addressing kids who may fail and alternative ways of doing that particularly with some of the bilingual youngsters, with youngsters who come from a depressed background. I don't think it's a fair test in that realm. Culturally, I don't think it's a fair test for some of the inner-city kids. I think that some alternatives need to be developed for those youngsters to be fair to them.

Other principals, such as George Oscar, feel that MCAS has "generally," been effective. George finds that his school has not yet achieved alignment with the frameworks, therefore it is more difficult for him to use MCAS for assessment purposes:

> I think it is also more effective to say cumulatively, at a point whether it be 5th, 6th, or 7th grade, we will have taught those subjects that are covered by the MCAS test range but not necessarily by grades 5 or 6. That really requires a very close

> correlation to what we are teaching in the frameworks and what is really going on in the classroom and I think it is a much more liberal view at this point of what is being taught.

As noted in the analysis of Question 1, a principal such as George, who has yet to completely align his curriculum, may deem the process of alignment too cumbersome to fully implement, thereby affecting his MCAS results.

Other respondents such as Suzanne and John use similar phrases to describe their expectations for their students, explaining that they are not usually "surprised" by MCAS results. John states, "…we don't get a lot of surprises. Our real bright kids do well. Our run-of-the-mill kids struggle and it shows." Although Suzanne anticipates the results of the test she receives, nonetheless she views the test as one factor in determining student achievement. She explains, "No, I don't rely on these tests because it doesn't represent the whole child."

Some administrators are especially defensive of their students' performance on the MCAS and denounce the test as being too complicated. Barbara, an inner-city principal whose school falls into the A category, is adamantly opposed to the level of difficulty the MCAS presents to her students. Though she believes that her writing has improved because of the rubric provided by the state, she feels that:

> ….in the other subject areas I think that it's too tricky. The math this year was outrageous. Really. And I heard the 8th grade was too. 5th grade social studies…..But the other tests are, first of all, I think that a lot of ways, and again this goes back to the framework, that it is not developmentally appropriate. Now they are changing that and we'll see where it goes. Changes have been throwing people off. You know, they threw in Mesopotamia and all that stuff. Tell me what kid can conceptualize that at that age. They barely know every state in the country.

Given these concerns, Barbara believes that the test is not completely aligned with students' cognitive development concerning the curriculum frameworks. Although she is aware that the test holds the potential to improve subject areas, she nevertheless insists that modifications will be necessary to more adequately address children's learning levels.

In conjunction with other principals concerned about the test's effectiveness as an appropriate assessment tool, Carla summarizes her views through a comprehensive analysis:

> I don't believe they have evaluated the student achievement, I don't believe that is their purpose – I think it is to evaluate the curriculum, the frameworks, and that it is not a student achievement test but I believe the media and the DOE have changed the focus on that and schools have changed the focus that when MCAS came out it was to evaluate the curriculum. It was to make sure that the curriculum frameworks were being implemented equally across all schools. It has turned into a student achievement test with a graduation requirement and the scores and that wasn't the original purpose of it so somehow it got messed up in the translation. And it is unfortunate because I don't know if we'll ever be able to go back. I think the public just looks at MCAS as a basics skills test and these kids aren't learning anything in school and that is not what it is.

Accordingly, Carla's understanding of the initial purpose of MCAS has been transformed from that of an equalizing agent designed to ensure accountability across schools, to a high stakes test whereby students are measured against high standards of the curriculum frameworks. The resulting change leaves Carla ambivalent about its utility as an evaluative test.

Other principals feel equally uncertain about the purpose of the MCAS as an assessment tool. For Cliff, the test assesses effective *teaching* rather than student achievement. He contends:

> Test scores are a reflection, as seen by the public and the media, on the quality of instruction and have nothing to do with student achievement which is totally

> contrary to the purpose of ed reform. Totally contrary. And the comparison of scores, school to school, district to district, is ridiculous and has nothing to do with ed. reform because ed. reform also called for alternate means of assessment besides MCAS and no one hears about this because they are all different and they can't be compared from school to school or town to town. I don't think they have a newspaper with enough pages in it to print it all.

For these reasons, Cliff does not believe that the MCAS "has been an effective instrument of measurement of children's learning." Rather, "it continues to be effectively misused to measure teachers' teaching."

Although in his current setting, a k-3 school where only the third grade students are required to take a portion of the test, Donald believes that the test is only part of the child's profile. In his school, he still relies "upon teacher report, report cards, classroom performance and district wide assessments as opposed to the MCAS." Consequently, Donald believes that the MCAS' effectiveness is contingent upon the grade level at which the school functions, such as the secondary level "where the stakes are much higher."

As an educator who also favors a more comprehensive assessment approach with a variety of measures that indicate success or failure, Karl expresses a preference for nationally norm standardized tests since they generate out to more than "four broad categories" instead of stanines. According to Karl, the tests "don't have a lot of weight in decisions concerning students." He contends:

> …we just don't use this type of testing, standardized testing, as a big, big key factor in individual decisions about students. We do a lot of our own individual testing and assessment of those youngsters. These tests are more helpful to us in judging our overall performance as a school. Also, you know that I worry about some youngsters on the lower end of capability and how their results are going to come out on MCAS and what that is going to mean as opposed to setting up individual plans for those youngsters and seeing that they are making appropriate growth where the goals have been set for them.

Although she believes the tests serve some utility in assessing student performance, Janine would prefer a test in which the results were returned more expediently in order to analyze the assessment scores and develop appropriate strategies to address the needs indicated in the results. She explains:

> …it is difficult to use the test for planning purposes due to the lateness that you actually receive the results back. It would be a whole lot better if we were getting the results in June as opposed to November as we do in many cases. Clearly I think that because we get the third grade test back a little earlier they become a device that we can use to guide teachers to give them a heads up and give them a warning of the type of students they might have in their group. The 4th grade test is sort of a beacon when you get the results in November and look at them as they stand against the rest of the district. It allows you to see where you are in a competitive group you are doing business with. So if you are low in writing you certainly go after the writing. If your issue is reading comprehension then you are looking to attack that. The answer, I guess, is that you do need to pay attention to what's going on. I don't know how efficiently they actually do it because of the time.

As with all of the other principals, Kevin believes that the test is a better assessor of teacher performance rather than student achievement:

> To expand on that, we compare ourselves not only on MCAS testing but also our own in-house testing and we do it a number of ways. We compare every single class, every teacher with the district scores and with our own scores so that every teacher knows. So you can see for example that every teacher knows, see for example that there are third or fourth grades that are in the green that completely exceeded the district average on the Metropolitan tests.

In accordance with the majority of principals, Kevin prefers a comprehensive assessment approach that is timelier in offering guidance for students, teachers, and administrators. As he explains, "It is so hard to understand at this level because the students who are your major test takers are gone (4th graders) when you get the results. It certainly gives us retrospect, a look back at a class, but it is awfully hard to relate to a class when you really get hooked up in the new class."

Question 3. (How are the results of these tests used by this school? Are they used by any of these groups to alter what is being taught or how it is being taught?)

The MCAS results are employed by the various principals in such ways as to meet the needs of their individual schools. Most principals find the test useful in developing their school improvement plans and curricular foundations. The scores help principals implement informal goals that are tied to their district's broader achievement objectives. Whereas most principals agree that the test results help them identify areas of student achievement in need of modification, others are concerned about the continual revisions that impact the curricular frameworks. They believe that the cycle of revisions posed by the state leads to unfair accountability for student achievement in that the curriculum frameworks are a constant work-in-progress.

When asked to explain how the school, the district, and the state utilize the test results, principals discuss how the test impacts what is taught in the school. Some principals use the MCAS results to enhance their school improvement plans and hopefully increase student achievement. For example, both Barbara and John use the test results to create their school improvement plans. Barbara uses the test results, analyzing both multiple-choice and open-response answers, to better understand how her students are performing. She also uses the scores to, "develop our school improvement plan based on that with specific achievement objectives like we are going to raise the open-response average from 4.2 to 4.5." Barbara finds that she uses the test, "on a building-wide basis," more than on an individual level. Likewise, John works with his school council on developing a school improvement plan based upon MCAS results. He explains, "Well, again, our school improvement plan is driven by it. We look at ourselves and see what

we are doing. We did pick some areas, especially number sense, for instance probability that we knew we really had to work at." Together, Barbara and John have found that MCAS results serve to bolster their school improvement plans and enhance their curricular foundations.

Several of the other principals also use the scores to help them create informal goals for their schools which may not be connected with the objectives of the school council, rather they are related back to the school district's objectives. Eileen has used the results of the test to analyze the performance levels of her students:

> Our district asks us to go through it. Apply it to your school. Compare and contrast it above and below. Kids get fed in. How'd they do? Do they drop when they go to your school? Do they increase when they leave your school? And those kinds of issues. We look at our methodology and we look at our curriculum and see if we are meeting the needs of our kids. Were we meeting them before? If they were meeting them before and we are not meeting them now, what did they do in the lower grades?

Through a detailed analysis of her testing results, Eileen has the ability to form her own plan-of-action, independent of the school improvement plan, but with similar outcomes. Although a daunting task, Eileen is better able to address the needs of each student by looking at individual students' scores.

Although she is able to use her scores at the building level, Carla is careful not to place an excessive amount of credence on the results since the State continues to alter the curriculum frameworks. She explains that:

> Obviously, in the school, I use it to evaluate the curriculum to see if we are scoring low on a certain question - did we cover that, is it in our curriculum ? Did we teach it, or did we not teach it and then obviously if we didn't then we better make sure we do it.

Carla believes the State has used test scores to evaluate performance from school to school but is confused about what she should be focusing on with students while the frameworks continue to remain in draft form:

> I think the state uses them to rate schools against schools within the state and use it like a report card to tell parents whether they are a good school or not....They get the frameworks out and then change them. What draft are we on now in science? Are these questions from June 2001 or what? There is too much confusion about that. I think Social Studies is probably the worst because no one knows what page they are on and they don't know what they are supposed to be doing from year to year at any given time.

Carla's frustration with the State is echoed by Donald as he continues to explore curricular modifications based on MCAS results, but only to the extent that the curriculum frameworks have been clearly defined. Donald's school district has a continuing program of, "constant revision and constant assessment of what is happening in the classroom.....trying to tie in the instructional strategies to the frameworks as the frameworks continue to be revised." He mentions that the frameworks for social studies are "still ongoing," and math was recently revised for a second time. He confesses that his school is "trying to catch up with what has been going on in the classroom with how the State continues to revise the test. It is almost like a merry-go-round. We are still trying to catch up." Both Donald and Eileen are frustrated with the framework development and revision process because districts have difficulty maintaining their own curricular modifications. Another prominent issue is that the state holds schools accountable for student achievement on frameworks that have not yet been formally approved or are in the process of being revised. For smaller school districts, the task of curricular alignment becomes "ongoing," never reaching finality as the state revises frameworks regularly.

Several of the principals take a systematic approach to the review of the test scores, categorizing the students in terms of their academic need, and altering how and what is being taught. Karl finds the detailed results helpful in that they make it possible to "target real specific questions or broad areas of relative weakness," and share that information with the faculty. He even likes the fact that he is able to seek out open-ended questions which permit him to "practice that type of open-ended question and change our practice." Karl has been especially interested in how the scores have been used to alter how writing is taught at his school:

> I think that it has made a significant difference in altering how things are being taught…particularly in the area of emphasizing writing and more expanded writing and more in-depth writing and detailed writing. I think that is where in my experience the biggest shift has been. It has been in the movement of expecting more writing production in terms of the everyday business that we do here in the school and I think it is also reemphasizes the exactness of what kids deal with because of the mechanical components of assessing writing.

Karl's use of the MCAS results has been proactive in the sense that he does not ignore how his students are achieving. Other principals, such as Michael, Cliff and Janine all use the scores to guide them in assisting low scoring students as well as creating curricular changes that address areas of weakness. Michael focuses on students in the needs improvement category as well as students who scored poorly but who take advanced courses. Based on the spring 2000 MCAS scores, Cliff dedicated this past school year's professional development to phonemic awareness in grades K-2 and math revisions for grades three and four. He explains, "We are looking at the kinds of questions which contain the kind of material that kids need to know as shown by the frameworks." Janine uses the scores to "identify" those students requiring remedial services, but also "looks at the top kids," to "look at the work they did," and uses it as a

"model." She also reviews the questions and determines whether or not she needs to prioritize curricular changes based upon poor scores.

Question 4. (Are you satisfied with the amount of emphasis placed on state assessment scores?)

Although school districts, the state and the media view MCAS scores in their totality, rarely delving into individual students or scenarios, it is the responsibility of the school principal to analyze his or her scores as closely as deemed necessary. Many of the principals use their scores to guide a portion of their instruction, based upon areas of strength or weakness for their particular school. Other principals feel that their school districts place inordinate amounts of pressure on them to perform well on the test.

When asked whether or not they were pleased with the attention given to the MCAS, the participants elicited much more than a "yes" or "no" response. Similar to question number seven which deals with the public release of the test scores, this question often generates emotional responses on the part of principals. Although eleven out of twelve participants answered either affirmatively or negatively, their extended responses often contained similar themes and information. One participant, Janine, did not answer the question directly but did express concerns over the "public nature of the test" which adds "stress" and "pressure" to teachers.

Five of the principals believe that there is too much importance assigned to MCAS scores but added little to support their responses. Eileen and Barbara feel strong enough about their positions to warrant repetition. Barbara states, "I think there is too much. There is too much," while Eileen remarks, "No, too much emphasis. Absolutely,

it is too much emphasis." Barbara adds that the time consumed on testing, including the administration of the test, is too great. Suzanne agrees with Eileen and Barbara but includes, "the fact that it's been divided amongst the grade levels," has alleviated the emphasis placed on only a few grades. Cliff is "disappointed" that the state has "spent too much time on MCAS scores," and feels they are "used more for political purposes than educational." His attitude that MCAS serves as a political agenda item emphasizes the precarious nature of today's public education landscape. The local control that school districts once had has dissipated under the state level testing regime.

Like many of her colleagues, Carla's substantive response is the result of her frustrations about testing a large portion of her students which ultimately draws upon instructional time:

> No, obviously MCAS is only one piece of the puzzle it doesn't give us a true picture of how good a school is or how well-rounded the kids are. I see this district puts more emphasis on the scores; more than any other school district that I am aware of. That may change with other districts now. I just think that it is one tiny piece of the puzzle yet it takes 95% of our time and attention especially during MCAS testing. The problem with a K-8 school is we have 3 through 8. Not only are my resource room teachers going crazy with modifications and small group test setting, inventorying, even though we only have 55 or 60 kids in a class it doesn't matter with the amount of paperwork you have to do for the state. All of the accountability is still there and is generally is ok. But the 2 weeks in May will just be gone.

As the building principal of a K-8 school, Carla has six different grade levels that are tested every spring. When she states that her school will not run effectively for the two weeks of testing, items such as service delivery for students receiving Special Education will be altered to insure proper test administration. Carla also mentions the importance her school district places on good MCAS scores and the pressure she feels to

perform well. Although the pressure is not coming directly from the state, the school district may feel the need to increase performance on the test.

The remaining administrators all believe that there is the correct amount of emphasis placed on MCAS, with many under the impression that the emphasis has improved learning in their schools. Karl has strong feelings about the balance school's must find in order to develop a complete student. His school has continually scored well, yet he places a great deal of emphasis on social/emotional programming in his school. He states:

> I do think there should be a lot of emphasis placed on these scores….. I don't agree with the critics who say that it prevents you from doing other important things because this school in the past year was in the top 3% of 4th grade performance on MCAS in the state. We've been as high as the top .8% in certain years and at the same time the kids have a very exciting curriculum with a lot of authentic, hands-on active learning and exciting learning. We have an equally strong emphasis on character development and the development of self-esteem, honesty, caring, kindness and form school assemblies on a regular basis just focusing on that and recognizing that. So I believe that you can go to a school where learning is a very active, hands-on, exciting experience where there is as much emphasis on non-academic things that are really important to what people have to develop to be a good society and still do well on MCAS.

Michael is also satisfied with the emphasis placed on the testing results but feels the state has compromised its standards since education reform was enacted. He explains:

> What I liked about these test initially was that they set the bar where you wanted to go. That is what I understood a goal to be, that where you would set the bar where you want to achieve. You don't set the bar where you are. That is always easy to get over. Over the two or three years they keep lowering the bar, the standards, and that bothers me a great deal.

His belief that, "if it is a standard then keep it a standard and set it to where you want to be not where you are," indicates his determination to maintain the amount of emphasis placed on the testing results

George and Donald both agree with their peers, but are less definitive in their responses. Donald believes that since "people are becoming a little bit more accepting of MCAS, I don't hear as much negativity as I did maybe a year ago." He feels that the emphasis is "satisfactory," even though "there are still some rough edges." George finds that his district places only a "moderate" amount of emphasis on testing and they are "not seen as a make-it or break-it kind of thing." Both administrators do not feel overly pressured to perform well on MCAS.

Finally, Kevin thinks that there is a fair amount of emphasis because it "makes us want to do better." He appreciates the fact that principals are now responsible for student achievement, especially since principal unions have been eliminated. Kevin feels that "achievement puts a lot of emphasis on assessment scores," and principals should be the ones to assure that both occur in schools.

Of the five administrators who believe there is too much emphasis placed on MCAS scores, both Barbara and Suzanne fall into the lowest categories, A and B, respectively. Cliff (category D) is the only principal who agrees with Suzanne and Barbara. The other seven administrators all believe that the emphasis is proper, yet their test scores are all average or above average. Consequently, the amount of pressure that a building principal confronts is dependent upon how well her/his school scores on the MCAS.

Question 5. (If you were in a position to make decisions about testing, what would you recommend?)

Although their responses were brief, most of the principals' recommendations were specifically tied to the equity of the test as an assessment measure. While all of the participants were convinced of the necessity of developing an appropriate accountability measure of student achievement, they nevertheless expressed reservations about the emphasis placed on the MCAS.

There are many recommendations that principals offer when asked to contribute their thoughts to decisions made about testing. Their responses are more individualized and conform less to a standard response. Only two of the principals, Michael and Janine, both in the D category, recommend that MCAS should remain as is. Janine clearly states her position as she remarks, "I think the state is right on target with what they are doing exactly," while Michael recommends, "… holding to the standard." Such responses are likely given that these two principals both have high rates of success on the MCAS, and are less likely to make modifications.

Many of the principals express their belief in accountability and feel that MCAS has resulted in better tracking of student test scores with the advent of the SASID [State Assigned Student Identification], but they remain concerned with the level of difficulty associated with the exam. Carla explains that principals have to be held accountable and "probably haven't been in the past." With modifications to the testing program, Carla feels that accountability and assessment play a vital role in education reform:

> I wish we could find a happy medium though and I believe the MCAS test is a very difficult high stakes test and I would like to see something less, maybe something more like the MEAPS…. It is like test the kids on what they need to know to be successful and not on what the board of education feels is important. I

> would rather see kids graduate with basic skills as opposed to not graduating because they……live in an urban setting and they can't pass the MCAS because they haven't had the opportunities.

Although she works in an affluent community, with minimal diversity, Carla maintains that the test is more biased against students who come from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds then the average suburban student. For Carla, the "difficult" nature of the test is magnified for students living in urban areas.

Karl remains concerned for students taking the MCAS with "substantial special needs [because they] have to be held to the same standards…..at the same pace," as regular education students. He appreciates that the state wants to "make sure that we don't sell anyone short and we don't write anybody off from the fact that the curriculum frameworks need to be achieved by all students to the level that they're capable of achieving." Yet, he does not appreciate having such students held to the same expectations on an annual basis. Karl is not sure how best to address the "youngsters that will never be able to achieve that [pass MCAS]," and hopes the state will find a way to assess the situation without lowering standards.

Like Karl, Barbara is concerned that Special Education students will not perform well on the MCAS since it tests everyone at the same level. She also explains that a test of basic skills, similar to Carla's suggestion, is all that is necessary to show academic growth and an understanding of basic skills. Barbara continues:

> Yes, give everyone an Iowa. And you know what else we could do? We could graph kids, individual kids, ok from June and say is he showing progress? If he has shown growth by the next year then you know that you are doing your job. You are not going to get everybody up to grade level. That is just the reality.

She believes that a test of basic skills, administered annually to gauge progress, would be more than sufficient to measure student achievement, especially those who receive Special Education services. Both Cliff and George concur with Barbara and believe that districts should be responsible for administering their own standardized assessments annually and then reporting the results to the state. George adds that grades one through twelve should be part of the "annualized ritual," so every grade will be held responsible for student achievement.

Not only do principals seek equity for Special Education students, but they are concerned about the general equity and fairness of the test. Eileen does not mind testing as long as "the people doing the testing understand that you as an institution of education are not going to be able to be successful with 100% of the kids." She is concerned that the state and public view test scores in isolation without truly understanding the complexities of running a school. Similarly, Donald worries that "we are still too focused on purely the highest scores and no matter to what means we get there the end result is all we care about and I think that is wrong." He is convinced that educators may be neglecting "creativity," at the expense of better test scores. Finally, Kevin finds a "flaw" in how the MCAS is "going to universally judge kids," because he, like Karl, fears that the state will eventually lower standards for all students and jeopardizes the integrity of the exam.

Question 6. (Describe how the MCAS test has affected your daily responsibilities as the educational leader of your school?)

Despite the varied responses, it is clear that all of the principals' jobs have been affected by the test in some way. From the time spent administering the test to examining the results and making appropriate curricular changes, the processes which principals follow are dependent upon the individual needs associated with their schools.

The occupation of being a building principal requires a great deal of effort on a daily basis. Extra items added onto the daily responsibilities usually result in other items becoming less important. A principal's time is precious and all principals will admit that they prioritize how they use their time based upon the relevance or importance of a subject. Even though the MCAS test happens for only a few weeks in the spring, it has become one of the most important items that principals frequently deal with.

Janine's statement, "I don't think…I couldn't measure this on a daily basis. It takes up chunks of your time intermittently," synopsizes how many of the interviewees respond to this question. Her literal response of "about 10 days in the summer and maybe 7 or 8 days is November when the results come in," does not necessarily reflect the daily work Janine does with her staff around curriculum and best teaching practices. She admits that "you look to see what is going on that supports the curriculum as you walk through the building," but does not feel she is able to measure her time actually spent daily on MCAS.

Both Cliff and Barbara reiterate Janine's statement that the principal does not focus on MCAS daily. Barbara explains, "On a general basis I think that we aim, not on a daily basis, but I think you kind of look at goals…..So as principal, the bigger picture

person, that is where I am heading in looking at …where our weaknesses are." Like Janine, she feels the daily influence of the test does not affect her because she focuses on broader objectives. In turn, Cliff mentions the amount of time that is required for testing. He estimates that he spends time, "for the writing up of new schedules, for the orientation of staff for the test, for the distribution of tests, the collection of tests, the packaging of tests. It is just an awful lot of time." Though his daily responsibilities seem not to have changed, Cliff finds that the few weeks in April and May encompass much of his daily time in school.

Although he is uncertain about the test's impact on his job, Karl admits, "it [MCAS] has taken up a lot of time in terms of reviewing, responding to, disseminating of the results of the testing itself." He acknowledges that the testing does "mean less time for some other things," but he contends that the time spent on testing, "gives me a dipstick in terms of where things are at that helps guide in terms of how we set the priorities for the school."

Initially, Michael has a similar stance to Janine's, but as he explains his response, he realizes how MCAS affects his daily responsibilities. He states:

> I don't know that it affects me daily. I guess in a sense we have goals that are targeted in teacher evaluation that reflect improvement in our MCAS scores so in that sense I am looking at instruction. It is certainly an overarching goal to get kids involved, to actively engage kids, and the bottom line is that and it is in every teacher's evaluation this year…..I guess in a sense that since we are actively engaging kids and we are looking at teaching instruction strategies on a daily basis that are better. In that sense, yes, it has been very positive. I have expectations that my teachers will engage their kids, will set rubrics for long term, short term, single question answers and to show kids how to meet the different levels of the rubric. So yes, I think it has had more of a daily impact than I would have said if I hadn't talked through my answer right now.

Hence, Michael's position as principal entails guiding his school council, assessing his teachers and monitoring student learning, all of which affect his job daily.

Carla and Donald both have responses similar to Michael's in that curriculum review on a daily basis is happening in their schools. Donald notes that the principals' "responsibilities will focus more and more on what actual curriculum is being taught and happening in the classroom and looking for instructional practices that reflect the frameworks." He agrees that time will always be spent on the actual administration of the test, but he feels that curricular changes have led principals to increase their awareness of what is occurring in the classrooms on a daily basis. For Carla, she believes that "it has put more emphasis on curriculum and accountability and best practices going on in the classroom." She recalls that prior to MCAS, "principals didn't hold teachers accountable for what was going on in their classrooms." Carla emphasizes that teaching now must reflect the needs of MCAS on a "daily basis so that they [students] are familiar with what is going on."

Two principals, Kevin and Eileen, admit that MCAS has drastically affected their jobs in that it has changed what they focus on daily. Kevin replies that, "You always think of testing. You always think of scoring." He believes that as a principal you "spend a lot of your daily responsibilities in promoting an environment for good learning and making sure that teachers are comfortable and they are not nervous." Like Kevin, Eileen focuses on issues involving MCAS on a daily basis. She and her staff, "zone in on a daily basis with unit lesson plans that include benchmarks. The benchmarks reflect the standards and the strands of the frameworks." In order to insure that the frameworks are being taught, Eileen observes teachers "daily," looking for connections back to the

strands. These principals confess that MCAS has changed their daily responsibilities in the sense that both are extremely aware of how teaching and learning occur in their respective schools.

Question 7. (How do you feel the public release of the test scores impacts the school and the community? How does it affect you?)

Given all of the varied responses, many principals agree that the public release of the test scores serves the specific purpose of holding schools accountable for student achievement based upon the curriculum frameworks. Although many principals disagree with the process, there are others who feel that it stimulates and encourages better outcomes for assessment. Communities in the state are now partially judged by their MCAS scores, somewhat similar to how communities are judged by their tax rates. Consequently schools that do well on MCAS are viewed in a more positive light than schools that do not perform well. Unfortunately, as many principals have indicated, this may lead to misconceptions about the quality of a student's education in a given school district.

The release of the MCAS scores, as viewed by principals, is a way for the public to see how schools perform on the assessment. Local newspapers, such as the *Boston Globe* and *Worcester Telegram and Gazette*, now devote entire sections of their papers to MCAS scores. The schools and school districts are ranked in descending order from first to last. Everyone involved in public education, including administrators, teachers and parents, nervously await the day when the scores are published and they compare school to school, town to town, and district to district.

The impact the public release of the test scores has been decidedly different for two groups of principals. One group, half of the respondents, feels that the effect is negative on schools, teachers, students and principals. The second group believes that the publishing of test scores is effective. Another two principals, Barbara and Janine, are less clear in their responses, believing that the test doesn't impact the school in either a negative or positive manner. Finally, Kevin, believes that the impact of the scores, "depends upon how they come out."

Two interviewees, Barbara and Janine, feel the testing doesn't affect or impact them or their school community in any sense. Barbara, whose school is in the A category, believes that there has been no impact as she states, "Nothing. We've had no impact. Nobody calls. Nobody comes to the parent meetings that we have, nobody. Nobody called to ask a question. Nothing." Janine, whose school is categorized with D, has a similar stance as she replies:

> My school in particular, you don't notice very much. I think parents in general are skeptical of the whole program. The first year we took the test at my school we had 80% who scored in the needs improvement range in reading and I received not one single phone call about it. So I don't think people really get too charged up about it. They rely more on what the teacher is telling them.... It sure got my attention but I didn't get one phone call.

Even though Janine's school scored very well on MCAS and Barbara's did not, both principals have parent/guardian populations who seem not to be impacted by the public release of the scores.

One principal, Kevin, believes that the public release of the scores is really dependent upon how well one's school performs on the assessment. He remarks:

> Good is good and bad is bad. That is kind of a dumb statement but is that way it is. For the first three or four years I was up here I was able to do well and say to people sure we are making headway but that headway is negated by the fact that

> we are still low in the district and we have to do something different and we have to look at that and we can't take great pride in gains if we don't leapfrog some of the other schools on the way up. I don't think any other school in the district, to my knowledge, puts as much emphasis in their program as I do. I think we put a lot of emphasis on this. I think it affects how we think about learning. I think it affects how we think about teaching what we purchase. The testing program concerns teachers, big time.

Consequently, Kevin places a great deal of pressure on himself to have his school perform well on the MCAS. As his scores fluctuate, he admits that he is less likely flaunt his scores to parents, other schools, and the community as he stated earlier, "if we go down again we'll hide."

Three of the principals, Karl, Michael and John, believe that the release of the test scores are "good." John believes that, "I think it makes us look good," and his parents are pleased with the level of achievement attained by the school. He reiterates, "…I think publicity wise it makes us look good. It verifies for us that our teachers work hard here." Michael also agrees that, "I guess it's a good thing," but explains that the release of the scores served to stimulate better performance for his school. Michael states:

> I was in an elementary school the first year we took it and the scores went up in that building we ended being the 4th out of 5 towns in terms of our performance. I think that was an embarrassment. Because it was an embarrassment it also served to motivate me and our building did much better the following year…Our performance was just pass the 60th percentile.

Although Michael was disappointed by the test results, he nevertheless believes that:

> Having that measurement is a good thing. People talk about teaching to the test and that not being a good thing but I disagree. All of the things that the test asks you to teach to are good instructional strategies and they are more about teaching kids problem solving, teaching kids how to define an answer, how to explain a process, even if you are teaching to the test the skills you are teaching are good skills to have.

Like Kevin, Michael believes that the release of the test scores serves as an impetus to do better, especially when the scores are considered low. Finally, Karl finds that the issuing of the MCAS results is positive because it permits schools to estimate where they are in reference to other schools and communities with similar attributes. He explains that, although his school has been successful, he feels that the scores are beneficial to those schools that do not achieve as high:

> I guess it [MCAS] is somewhat of a scorecard for people to make some decisions about where they want to live if education is a priority for their kids and I think that is ok because I think it does describe reality. I think there is consistency in the scoring so it is much more of a statement about how school or system is doing than a tool for independent student decision making. I think it can motivate, or reinforce a schools efforts and build pride and I think it can be a wake-up call and so far it has made me look pretty-good!

Hence, all three of these principals feel that the release of the MCAS results is constructive since it forces schools to review their programs regularly. They enjoy being able to compare themselves with other schools in order to assess how they compare in terms of achievement.

Six of the building administrators find that the release of the scores negatively impacts the school and the principal for many reasons. For instance, Cliff maintains that the scores breed a certain amount of concern from teachers, parents and the general public:

> I think test scores first have an impact on teachers, you know, the carrot and the stick approach… Teachers want to do a good job, ok, teachers want to do a good job and feel supported. And if they are not doing a good job then most teachers are receptive to ideas and suggestions on how to improve because they want to do a good job. It is the responsibility of educational leadership to provide the teacher with the support, the skills, the training and the materials and the atmosphere to enable them to do the good job that they seek to do…I think parents are more focused on their own child and less concerned with test scores of a school. I think parents take pride in our district about the test scores that the children in the district have. And as far as the public, the public clamors for accountability

except when it comes to them. Everyone wants rules, regulations and standards but if it doesn't fit them in their given situation with their child, or granddaughter or niece then they can easily find flaws. And there are many because we are in the human being business and all human beings have flaws.

Given the varied personal investments teachers, parents, and the community have regarding the test, it is not surprising that Cliff feels invested in the handling and the outcome of the test. Cliff is aware that education plays a unique role in its accountability to the general public. He explains:

> Education for me is one of the few businesses that focus more on what we're not doing rather than what we are doing. Education is the only business that keeps on taking more roles in the business of human beings with the difficulty being the word that is the most difficult in the English language, "no"– that is not our job that is not our responsibility. We are trying to do some of that. It is like a public view, and by public I mean primarily people who don't have kids in school. They view it as they view taxes. Taxes are always too high; money is always being wasted, what happened to the *good old days*. They are called the *good old days* because we only remember the good things. In current days we are so connected to the media where we are always reminded of all of the bad things going wrong in the world, or in our community, or in our test scores. That is why.

Cliff's commentary on society and the MCAS is pertinent in that his concern that schools are seen in the same light as businesses is echoed in other responses dealing with competition. Like businesses that compete with one another, schools are now compared based upon their MCAS scores. Carla notes that:

> I wouldn't do the public release because then I think that people start comparing us to other schools. I've seen real estate people use our test scores to promote buying a house in a community and I think it is the wrong thing to do and I don't know if the state uses it to embarrass or to let the voters know that we do take them seriously and we are going to publicize it. I don't know what they gain from that other than the public's right to know. It affects us because we get the calls from the parents – "I can't believe we did so poorly. What are we doing about it?"

As schools become viewed as commodities, Carla believes that school performance on MCAS will continue to gain importance. Furthermore, Suzanne and

George comment on the competitive and divisive nature of the scores being released. Suzanne explains that communities and schools are set against one another, "…it really does pit one school against the other and one community against the other and I don't know if that is a real positive thing." George agrees with Suzanne and adds that, "I think it further separates the rich from the poor and I think it has a horrific impact." He is concerned that the release of the scores,

> ….creates a mentality that while it's true that the rich get better and the rich get richer because it is a self-fulfilling prophecy that if you live in a rich town then you can afford good schools and you produce rich and smart kids. That seems to be true. So that dichotomy is further pushed in the wrong direction by the public attentiveness to MCAS scores. While I don't at all fault the high performing districts that advertise that, it does not mean that those schools that are poor and not performing should be made public spectacles of that with no real serious system for remediation in the state.

The "self-fulfilling prophecy" the George refers to concerns him since his school is compared with others that have many more resources.

Lastly, Eileen and Donald, also focus on issues of equity and anxiety. Eileen feels that the publishing of the scores, "…in the newspaper is just not fair." She believes that the state could be better in their public relations position on the MCAS by not publishing the scores. Donald summarizes his feelings when the test scores are released in one word:

> Anxiety. It is still anxiety ridden. It seems in the past year or two that there is much more apprehension because we have been on a roll, in a negative way across the state and I think that school communities, administrators and teachers began to feel the pressure as soon as that time gets closer to the release in late fall early winter and I don't think that the school can be neutral or can't be impacted by that. I think that schools will be forever impacted by the release of scores as a natural reaction to how my kids did, how the school did, how my particular class did.

Donald's unease caused by the release of the scores may well be indicative of many principals across the state that feel that the public release only incites further negativity surrounding public education.

Question 8. (How does the MCAS fit within your ideal vision of student learning gains/assessment?)

Although these responses seem to indicate that there are clear divisions between those that embrace MCAS as an assessment tool and those that are leery of it, most expressed a reasonable position by acknowledging the test's place in student evaluation. However, the point of contention raised by most concerned the fact that the MCAS test currently serves as the only formal assessment measure offered by the state.

The visions that principals have for their students are very similar. Over half of the administrators believe that MCAS is only one tool and should not be used in isolation to judge student assessment. Most of the administrators feel that the test has changed the education landscape: some for the better, others for worse. As an assessment tool, MCAS defines the content and pedagogy of what students are taught and invariably must fit into an administrator's vision in order to be considered successful.

Seven of the twelve interviewees consider the MCAS to be part of the student measurement process in terms of forming a cohesive educational evaluation procedure. For example, Suzanne believes that the test is not as terrible as it is made out to be, as long as it is used to make improvements to the curriculum in conjunction with other forms of assessment. She maintains, "You are taking one tool and rating them [students]," which she feels negates other forms of learning that occur in her school. She

remarks, "In fact, our most technologically sound kid is at the bottom of the scale on MCAS."

Eileen agrees with Suzanne as she states:

> MCAS is one piece. It is not the whole picture. When used as a tool in that manner it can be used effectively. When used as the be all and end all we can be doing a disservice to kids. Assessment is a big piece of learning and you have to take curriculum, instruction and assessment together. I don't think you can take any one of those pieces separate from the other and be a good educator. You have to understand where assessment fits in to curriculum and instruction. Assessment needs to be looked at differently by teachers and that is a good part of Ed Reform. It's not just the test at the end. Assessment should happen everyday.

Eileen finds fault with the state in that it has yet to develop alternate means of assessment: "So MCAS is a piece of the assessment pie and by no stretch of the imagination anywhere near the whole piece. Not even half of the piece. The sooner the state learns that the better off we'll all be."

Several other principals' statements mirrored the aforementioned responses on assessment. Although Michael agrees that MCAS may be used as one form of assessing the total child, he also believes that a disservice is being done to the students since they are judged on one test taken during a brief period of time. He states:

> I don't know if one test will ever give you by itself a sense of the growth a kid has made. When I look at third, fourth or fifth graders who take the test, they are such a dynamic group that looking at a snapshot of a single Tuesday in May - I don't know how much that really tells us about the growth of a kid. But I think used in conjunction with standardized test scores, achievement, teacher progress, and couch that in terms of behavior, social growth and interaction, looking at the whole kid I think it gives you a piece of the puzzle but I don't think it gives you any great shakes at really understanding a kid.

Michael's middle school philosophy underscores the importance of not relying solely upon test scores to judge students during such a turbulent time in their adolescence. Like Michael, Donald finds that his "ideal vision....should be measured by

a number of factors, by a number of measures other than simply a test." He believes that, "There are so many ways to measure and appreciate student learning, student performance....creativity, ingenuity, ability per se but certainly skills that can't be measured by one test over the period of two weeks."

Finally, two principals, Carla and Cliff, share uneasy feelings about MCAS and its place in their visions. Carla remains concerned about the pressure to perform well on the test and with the idea of MCAS serving to assess the curriculum rather than individual students. She states, "...I think when we had the MEAPS we had a better sense of where we stood across the state or across the district with individual student names. Like Carla, Cliff would prefer that the state focus on reforming more than just public education. He states:

> We've invested millions of dollars through educational reform. We are so intent on reforming education - but remember we have ½ of a year- we are intent on reforming only a small percentage of the time – only when they are in school. Basically, we should go for the big picture and look about those other factors where the kid spends a majority of his/her time. Not just on the public school.

Cliff's ideal vision is more global then many of his counterparts in that he believes that educational reform must also be accompanied by social reform initiatives in order to be successful.

While most principals express a concern about the reliability of using a high-stakes test for assessment purposes, others, such as Barbara and Janine, believe that the MCAS has changed educational assessment for the better. Although Barbara's initial reaction to the MCAS is negative, she considers the benefits of the tests as she states, "I think kids are definitely getting a much more rigorous course of learning now than they

did a few years ago." Janine finds that she uses the test as a "barometer that lets you measure your school," and thinks that assessment must occur regularly.

For principals such as Kevin, John and Karl, the idea of student learning must entail assessment as a tool for understanding student growth and performance. Kevin begins, "Without it [MCAS], how do you know you are doing well? How do you know how a kid is doing?" He is pleased that testing happens because, "For many, many generations we presumed we were doing well," and the "MCAS has forced us to look at kids, look at what they are being taught, look at what they are learning and actually it makes a lot of good sense to me." John feels that the standards-based learning that his school and district has developed as a result of the curriculum frameworks and MCAS serves a concrete purpose. He even finds that the resulting items from the test, such as rubrics, are "good things for kids to see. Kids can see models and how they fit in and where they can be better." Lastly, Karl appreciates the consistency MCAS offers as an assessment tool as he remarks, "In general I don't have any problems with assessments and data and some things that you can kind of hold steady and see from one year to another how you are doing."

Question 9. (How has the MCAS changed the daily work of your school?)

While most of the principals believe that MCAS has led to school reform, specifically affecting the curricular planning, time management, and development of a cohesive plan of action for the learning community, one principal concludes that the test "hasn't changed the mission of our school or the fundamental needs." Rather, he states

that other socio-cultural factors affecting student learning continue to be the determining criteria of any learning environment.

The foremost way in which MCAS has changed the daily work of schools has been in the areas of content and pedagogy. The testing has forced administrators to ensure that the curriculum frameworks are being followed and the concepts are being taught in a manner consistent with other grade levels and schools.

On this question, two thirds of the respondents believe that the testing has changed the way in which teachers focus on curriculum. Specifically, principals feel the daily work conducted by teachers has become curriculum based and should always reflect the content of the curriculum frameworks. These administrators have found that the daily routines, lessons, and especially the program of study have all changed since MCAS was instituted.

Within the responses of these 8 administrators, there are varying levels of concern dealing with how the daily work has changed. On one end of the spectrum, Suzanne summarizes, "I have to honestly say that it really hasn't changed us in any way other than, again, that we make sure that the frameworks are being addressed." Although her statement initially seems to indicate that the test does not affect her curriculum, she nevertheless confirms that teaching must adhere to the structure provided through the frameworks. On the other end, most principals, such as Eileen, feel that MCAS has:

> ….changed the daily work with regards to daily lesson plans. MCAS is considered everyday in those lesson plans and the unit lesson plans that are developed over a period of a week or two weeks to a month of instruction. We don't ask for daily plans anymore we ask for unit lesson plans in which they look at the standards and what they are trying to accomplish with those standards over a period of time and how are they going to do it and how are they going to now that it is done. I want those three questions answered in their unit plans.

Offering almost identical responses, four other principals emphasize that the MCAS directly impacts their academic routines and objectives. According to Janine, although she believes that the MCAS "had the greatest impact at the levels where kids were tested," she is convinced that the test "has changed daily work and it is a trickle down." John reiterates, "I think it affects our daily routine." Likewise, Barbara finds that the MCAS:

> …changes the daily work in that teachers are teaching and planning and doing daily lesson plans by the frameworks and covering the material in the frameworks. And I think where people in the past always maybe did their favorite unit, the planets, whatever, and now there might not be time to do that favorite little unit at your grade level because you've got all those materials that you've been collecting for 20 years.

While Barbara identifies time as a factor that impacts what cannot be taught in the classroom, Karl examines how time is better utilized by teachers that are focused on specific objectives related to the test. He agrees that the MCAS "had impacted what goes on in the classrooms…on a daily basis," adding that "there is more teaching for thinking and there is more teaching of writing skills and more writing instruction and kids are doing more writing than ever before. MCAS has helped change that."

Kevin also agrees that time on learning has received more attention with the advent of the MCAS. He explains that, "one of the things we are looking for is that we are looking to condense down time." With teachers utilizing their instructional time more efficiently, Kevin explains how the test has led to better planning:

> One of the things it has changed is our emphasis on preparing kids for third grade reading so the daily work in school has changed considerably with the reintroduction of reading groups, ability grouping in reading, with different materials for students needing extra help rather than less of the same, much more emphasis of our daily work is on achievement. The threat of the reading test at grade three has promoted us to systemically to go into a package of assessments that start in k and conclude at the end of grade 2 so we get a sense that the kids are

> reading. This is daily ongoing work. We put major emphasis on technology so that these kids get a chance everyday to work a little bit at their level. It's got to have helped. We didn't go down. So some of the interventions are really working.

The belief that the test had led to better planning in a variety of subject areas is confirmed by Carla, who states, "we now have a more formal process that will be implemented…everybody taught the writing process any way they wanted. I think I've made them think about what they do, how they do it and why they do it as opposed to this is how we've always done things here."

Not only do many of the administrators believe that the MCAS leads to better productivity, but others, such as Cliff, believe that the test leads to a more effective learning community. For Cliff, the daily routines of the school have been modified through the collective planning by his teachers around the curriculum frameworks. Planning for the test "is an opportunity to provide itself as an appetizer for teachers to have a collegial conversation about something that affects all of them." Although this kind of collaboration is specific to the teacher, the subject matter, and the school climate, Cliff feels that teachers can "work together" through education reform.

To the contrary, Michael believes that as part of education reform, the MCAS has made it more difficult for the building principal to pull the school together. He contrasts the role of the principal prior to MCAS with the new pressures and responsibilities currently associated with the position. Relying on his personal experiences and observations, Michael expounds:

> Principals are now independent contractors...Now you've got to be able to plan… look at where you are and make a plan for where you need to be. That plan needs to be sold to parents and they need to become partners... Now you have to understand the curriculum, the assessment reflecting the curriculum, but more importantly you have to be able to develop the instruction to improve the delivery

of the curriculum to enhance the assessment. That just wasn't a priority before. There is so much more to what a principal does nowadays after ed reform on a daily basis, not necessarily just MCAS but ed reform and MCAS is a piece of that.

Question 10. (Has MCAS been a priority for professional development in your school? If "yes," in what ways?)

While each principal utilizes professional development for MCAS in some way, the amount in which s/he focuses on the subject is dependent upon the school's testing results and priorities. An overwhelming majority of the principals surveyed believe that MCAS has been a priority for professional development. Two of the principals, Carla and Cliff, are more ambivalent in their responses, while one principal feels MCAS has not been a priority at all.

The principals who feel that MCAS has been a priority for professional development spend much of their professional development time and money on developing teaching skills that relate back to MCAS. Janine believes that it is important to focus on a few strategic issues, such as writing or math, in order to make the most use of the development time. He explains, "I spent a lot of time last year developing a writing process across all grade levels. Two or three times a month, where we met as a whole staff to learn about the rubric and get everybody on the same page." Donald also finds that his professional development is, "focusing on MCAS related issues, open-ended questions, reading for comprehension, math scores." Although he admits that, "the professional development is in flux," his district plans on making a "much more concerted effort," to tie the results of the scores back to professional development. Like Donald, Kevin dedicates both of his professional days to student writing to assist in

student achievement. Similarly, Suzanne focuses her attention on her test scores so that "if we saw an area that we needed help in then we would do staff development in that." John's school also focuses on MCAS in that his teachers' professional goals relate back to implementing the curriculum and improving MCAS scores. He remarks that, "I give every teacher the chance to attend a professional development conference. Normally, it goes along with their goals."

While most principals do conduct some form of professional development related to MCAS, each plan is unique from one school to another depending upon what areas of the test or instruction principals wish to focus on. For instance, Eileen concentrates on further improving her teachers' understanding of differentiated instruction. She states:

> To get to the standard based environment we had two workshop days on standards based environments and that included lesson plans and the other included what a standards based classroom looks like. Differentiated instruction is another piece that would have happened with or without because we're heterogeneously grouped. We've had a lot on cooperative learning instruction, sharing, and that has helped our teachers a lot. Again, it is not easy, not easy. A teacher looking at a lesson to plan in differentiated instruction is far more complicated to plan than it ever was before. It is a different career.

Ultimately, through the development of a thorough training program for her staff in differentiated instruction, Eileen hopes to improve the teaching and ultimately the test scores in her school. Michael also focuses on differentiated instruction, explaining that:

> …differentiated instructional strategies target kids that need accommodating, utilization of technology and software as a tool for learning. I think that all of this is MCAS driven so when you look at the biggest change that we've made it is really in the delivery of instruction because we've gotten the information and feedback on assessment which measure us against the standardized curriculum so the only thing we can really improve is the delivery of instruction and the focus of that instruction.

Consequently, the MCAS allows Michael to use his professional development as a means of improving test scores as well as modifying instruction.

One principal, Barbara, has found that the MCAS, "…has driven what areas we are going to concentrate on." However, she feels torn by other professional development that her teachers would like to partake in. She comments:

> It's interesting because I contracted with a person who basically does a behavior system for our October release day and I'm grappling with whether I can waste the time on that. And yet I had teachers who went to see him at a workshop and said please, please, please get him to our school, and he is reasonable, it is a big issue in our building with all the different kinds of kids included, but curriculum wise I'm feeling like uh…should I do this. I haven't backed out of it yet so. And we only have two in-service days so it is pretty limited. Ours revolve around beefing up the weak areas in the curriculum like math.

Barbara is concerned that the priority placed upon professional development concerning MCAS forces principals to relinquish other programs or activities they or the teachers deem vital to their educational settings.

Unlike those who use their professional development to focus on the test, Carla and Cliff believe that the MCAS has been a part of their professional development schemes but is not a priority. Carla finds that her professional development is influenced by MCAS but does not guide it. She states, "This year we worked on report revisions because we had a different report card for every grade level based on however they [teachers] wanted to do it." She feels that, "…the only way to get effective professional development is through the evaluation process." Cliff agrees and also finds that

> …..teachers needed to hear and see what our scores looked like as a total school and how our schools compared to state averages, and even compared to other schools within our district. It is appropriate for me to have central office people come down here and do that and it was well done, discreetly, non-threatening but the message was sent and to a large degree the message was received. The purchase, it bothers me, but the purchase of MCAS prep materials. It is like you've got to play the game. You gotta buy chips. At least they know that they

(teachers) are being supported in terms of preparing the kids and themselves for MCAS test taking.

Thus, Cliff's approach to professional development involves MCAS but also includes exposing teachers to the MCAS scores from his school.

Of all the administrators interviewed, George is the only one who feels that MCAS has not been a main concern for professional development. He replies that MCAS has not been a priority, "…not at all." His school district is currently "limited," in its capacity to provide professional development.

Question 11. (What messages do you give the teachers on your staff about how to respond to the pressure to improve MCAS scores? Do you believe you are putting more time into teaching to the test?)

For a large portion of the respondents, they believe that they should protect teachers from the pressure to improve MCAS scores for several reasons. First, they want teachers to feel comfortable and not be anxiety ridden in the classroom. Second, the principals believe that it is their responsibility as building principals to absorb any external or internal stress to produce better scores. Finally, they think that students will perform better if teachers and the school are not pressured to do well by the administration.

When asked to reflect on how they communicate about the MCAS to their teaching staff, many principals believe that they have personally reduced the pressure for their teachers concerned with improving MCAS performance. Other principals offer specific statements about the feedback they give to teachers and the dialogue they partake in about MCAS.

Among those questioned, several principals believe that the pressure that teachers feel to improve MCAS scores has been alleviated by the administrators. Both Kevin and Karl feel that teachers should be kept at ease concerning MCAS. Karl remarks, "I have tried to take the pressure off my teachers by saying that we now have four years of data that support the fact that we know how to teach in ways that kids can accomplish this stuff, so relax and do your best." He also feels the teachers are spending more time teaching to the test but adds, "I'm comfortable with that because I think the test is there to measure the curriculum frameworks. The curriculum frameworks are what we've written our in-school curriculum around and the decisions have been made that this is what kids need to learn." Karl wants to insure that both his teachers and his students are well prepared for MCAS.

Kevin agrees with Karl that teachers must feel "comfortable," contending, "I think you just give them all the prep (time) you have. You have to tell them that each class is different. We are not testing oranges and oranges year after year so they have to be comfortable." Both principals find that the best solution for easing the anxiety to perform well on MCAS is to support teachers and make them feel relaxed about testing.

Other principals also attempt to relieve the stress of MCAS by deflecting any external or internal pressure from the teachers to themselves. Barbara states, "I don't get into that with my teachers. I take that pressure and I try not to pass it along. Obviously they read the newspapers and all but I don't make it a big deal. I think people are working hard and I don't think that they need it. I'm the one who is going to get fired." By downplaying the teacher's role, Barbara assumes the responsibility for MCAS scores which in turn increases the pressure she may feel. Additionally, principals such as

Suzanne, George and Cliff emphasize that teachers may not experience any pressure because they are not approached by the principal. George aptly notes,

> That presumes there are pressures to improve MCAS scores and I would say that the pressure has been reduced both by the superintendent and me. The superintendent's attitude is to go light on that pressure and we certainly respond to that by paying attention but not creating anxiety as much as we can, before the MCAS.

Likewise, Suzanne personally tells her teaching faculty "not to worry about it. You're doing your job and that's all I care about." Finally, Cliff's reassuring statement, "my job is to protect the teachers," leaves little doubt as to how much he and his fellow administrators concern themselves over teachers.

Additional responses from other interviewees focused on the specific nature of the other types of messages principals convey to teachers about MCAS performance. Donald focuses on the global nature of the MCAS:

> I'm talking to my staff about the fact that just because they are not teaching in an MCAS test year grade level that they are not part of the whole process, they are. I can't say that I dwell on the pressure to improve scores to the point where it is excessive or I became paranoid about it but I did give them messages about how to respond, what to say, how to respond in the classroom.

Like Donald, both John and Carla take similar routes in easing teaching tension but continue to have dialogue about MCAS with their respective staffs. John, "talks about methodology to teachers," and emphasizes that teaching strategies that once worked well with students "don't work as well," in conjunction with the curriculum frameworks. Carla tells her teachers to remain, "focused on good practices, teach the curriculum, model good methods. If you are anxious about it the kids will be anxious about it."

Finally, Eileen and Michael both use the MCAS to motivate teachers to become better educators. Eileen relays to her teachers that, "MCAS is a direct reflection of the standards. Don't ignore the standards…..People have to be held responsible and now you must be held responsible for individual student results." Unlike many of the other administrators, she believes that the ultimate responsibility continues to lie with the teacher. Michael echoes Eileen's sentiments as he remarks:

> Well, some of the messages they don't like to get. For instance they have a responsibility, not only a professional responsibility but a legal responsibility because we failed and individual student success plans need to be done. That is not an option, it is something they have to address, it is something they have to watch for. You've got to be able to target developed plans that help kids perform better. So it really invests them in the student's performance.

Michael's main concern is that teachers must be held liable for educating students as he completes his answer, "The message that I give them is that it is our job. It is what we do."

Question 12. (How well informed are you about information pertaining to the MCAS and where do you usually obtain such information?)

All of the principals feel that they are very well informed about MCAS and have a great deal of information shared with them from the DOE and their central offices. Many rely on the DOE website for information regarding the test, while others use curriculum facilitators and district personnel. Like his peers, Karl feels that "between what the state sends down and our district personnel put together for us…" he is well informed. In fact, five of the respondents believe that there is actually too much information sent from the state in order for them to process it adequately. Michael explains, "We get it on the DOE website and we get it ad nauseaum quite frankly. The info is good and it helps us to get

ready. The information can be overload....It can be very demanding looking at what they are asking you to do." Carla reiterates, "I don't have enough time to go through the website. I do think the DOE has been very good at informing us about MCAS—almost too much. There seems to be tons and tons of paperwork and the analysis they do." This feeling is confirmed by Janine, as she states, "you have to stay up with the DOE. There is a lot of stuff on there that I don't even know about." Hence, although principals do not always have the time to personally access and review material about the MCAS provided by the Department of Education, they all feel that an appropriate, if not excessive, amount of information is at their disposal.

Significant Themes

Although each of the questions previously presented offer individual assessments of the MCAS test based on each principal's responses, similar issues and themes can be extrapolated from the gathered data. The most crucial theme to surface is that of the correlation between MCAS scores, principals' attitudes and the type of district in which they work (Urban, Suburban and Rural). Although two principals who were from high performing schools were decidedly more negative then the other "C" and "D" principals, the "B" and "A" principals were generally unenthusiastic about the MCAS. Interestingly, the principals from categories "B" and "A" were only from Urban and Rural districts while none of the Suburban districts scored in either "A" or "B." Although this study focuses on a small fraction of principals currently leading schools in Massachusetts, it could be viewed as a microcosm of the larger population of school administrators. First, principals from both high and low performing schools view MCAS testing in

Massachusetts differently. Higher performing schools were more apt to have principals who agreed with testing and the curriculum frameworks whereas schools that were rated in categories "A" or "B" were less likely to support a majority of the questions posed. The Urban and Rural districts, with socio-economically diverse student bodies and increasingly difficult social issues constantly superseding the educational process, are not performing as well on the MCAS. Thus the principals of these schools have a steady, uphill battle in order to perform well on the state test and were consistently more "negative" in their responses then their peers in the higher categories.

Another theme to emerge was that many of the educators were not pleased with the public release of the testing, regardless of their categories. These principals did not agree with the test score release because it categorizes schools, teachers and principals. Consistently, most principals found the practice to be useless because it was only one test score and did not reflect the "whole child." Again, three of the category "D" principals were content with the current system of releasing test scores to the general public, but none of the "B" or "A" principals agreed with the practice. With the pressure to perform well on the test constantly bombarding them, the publication of the scores only emphasizes the need for these principals to try to improve their scores.

A final theme surfaced when reviewing the amount of emphasis placed on principals in terms of improving MCAS scores. Once more, the division between categories was evident in the various responses shared with me. Categories "C" and "D" were more likely to be satisfied with the amount of emphasis placed on testing, while principals from schools labeled "B" and "A" were not pleased with the importance placed on the test. The pressure to perform well on the MCAS has had a trickle-down effect,

ending with the student who must take the exam. Consequently, students, teachers and principals from low performing schools are likely to feel the stress associated with being one of the lowest scoring schools in the state.

Within the final chapter I will conduct a thorough review of the responses to the research questions and attempt to determine why principals perceive the MCAS as they do.

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This dissertation study focused on the interviews of twelve public school principals on their perceptions of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System [MCAS]. All of the principals were interviewed individually with their responses taped and then later transcribed. The principals were asked twelve questions designed to elicit responses that would highlight both individual preferences as well as group recommendations regarding the MCAS test. The following summary reflects upon each question individually and provides interpretations of the general responses.

When principals were asked to indicate whether or not the content of the MCAS reflects their priorities for instruction, most of them referred to the curriculum frameworks as their primary priority for instruction rather then the state test. Since the MCAS assesses students' knowledge of the information found in the frameworks, principals have prioritized both their instruction and instructional practices around teaching the strands from the frameworks. Thus the content of the MCAS becomes a priority for instruction.

A majority of the principals seemed satisfied with information found in the curriculum frameworks since they provide a "real common structure" of knowledge from which all schools can draw from. Prior to the frameworks, schools and teachers were not as focused on universal information since curricula differed drastically from district to district and school to school. The motivation to "realign" school and district curricula has been in response to the testing of the information found in the frameworks. If the

curriculum frameworks remained in place without the MCAS it is likely that schools and principals would not be as apt to align curricula since there would not be an assessment.

When asked to comment on the effectiveness of the MCAS in evaluating student achievement, a majority of the principals interviewed for this study stated that they believe that MCAS should not be the only assessment tool used by the state to determine how well a student understands the curriculum frameworks. Although they believe that the MCAS serves as a "gauge" to measure achievement, many principals expressed reservation about relying solely upon one measurement tool to define the academic strength of a student. Although some principals use the results to assist in placement for reading or math, others focus purely on the continued compliance of the frameworks and refuse to use the MCAS for purposes of placement.

As the principals talked through their responses, most of them placed a great deal of credence in individual teacher assessments. The MCAS serves as a "snapshot" of one particular moment and may not necessarily reflect the capabilities of the student during the other 179 school days. Teacher observations and assessments were considered a vital part of the assessment of any student since teachers work with the students over a prolonged period of time. The "informal assessments" mentioned by principals often include details that a test could not possibly determine as relevant.

One could ultimately argue that schools and principals should continue to use the MCAS as a "piece of the pie" without becoming too dependent on it for instructional purposes. As the interviewees indicated, a complete understanding of a student is dependent upon a variety of assessment measures and observations. From their

responses, principals seem to be finding their own balance from school to school on how to infuse MCAS into their evaluation systems.

Although common themes emerged when principals were asked to explain how they use the results of the MCAS in their schools, their responses varied greatly. Several principals found that they have been successful in using the test results to assist in developing school improvement plans. Other principals have used the results to help guide and assist in achieving goals set for the school. Finally, a few principals have used the scores to modify areas of the curriculum they classify as deficient in terms of MCAS results.

A serious complaint lodged by some of the principals concerned the amount of time it has taken the state to develop consistent curriculum frameworks across all subject areas that are currently tested. Specifically, Massachusetts has yet to formally adopt a curriculum framework for History/Social Science even though students are tested on the "drafts" which have not been officially adopted by the Department of Education and which school districts have spent a great deal of money. Principals are cautious about purchasing new books to support the curriculum since future changes to the frameworks will necessitate further purchasing of materials. Yet, as one principal notes, "you want to support the teachers." In order for schools to stay connected with the state frameworks they must continually modify and augment their own curricula on an annual basis.

Other comments dealing with the revisions made to the already adopted math frameworks were also negative in the sense that every change made by the state invariably subjects schools to further monetary investments. Revisions are a necessity for any curriculum and should be done every few years, but a few principals resent the

fact that they had just completed their alignment with the former math curriculum framework when a new one was recently released. For schools and districts with tight budgets, they are unable to make the necessary modifications quick enough to reflect alignment with the state curriculum. This undoubtedly hinders academic progress toward state goals and ultimately will obstruct some students from doing well on the MCAS.

When asked if they were satisfied with the amount of emphasis placed on the MCAS scores, principals offered definitive responses, leaving little room for interpretation. Those principals that believe the amount of emphasis placed on MCAS has been appropriate gave specific reasons for their responses. They feel that the state has set a standard, "the bar," which should be higher in order for all students to have goals that are challenging. They also believe that the emphasis placed on assessment results are "fair," and that education is better today then it has been in the past several decades. A majority of these principals also have above-average scores on the MCAS which would lead one to believe that they are less likely to feel threatened by the pressure to perform well on the test because they always have scored well.

Several of the principals adamantly denounced the pressure that they, their students, and especially their teachers feel about MCAS scores. Although some of the respondents were from high scoring schools, many of these principals had below average scores and worked diligently in an attempt to make them better. These low-scoring schools shared the common trait that their principals felt the need to protect teachers and make them "feel comfortable." The reasons for this are twofold. First, principals want their teachers to be calm and confident in themselves in order to be good educators. The second reason is that principals want the students to feel comfortable in order to do better

on the MCAS. Teachers who are nervous and anxious about the test will most likely allow such feelings to affect their classroom teaching style and management. Some principals whose schools were labeled in the "C" or "D" categories were less likely to suggest the need to protect their teachers from the pressure to do well on MCAS partly due to the fact that their schools performed adequately on the test. Yet two other principals from high scoring schools felt the need to shield their teachers from most of the information and feedback pertaining to MCAS because of personal preference. The pressure associated with the public release of the test scores seems to force principals from low scoring schools to guard their teachers and students from feeling undue anxiety to perform well on the MCAS. Thus principals from low scoring schools are almost forced to take on a protectionist's stance while those principals from high achieving schools have more latitude in how they approach the test. Ultimately, the repercussions from such a division could result in principals from low scoring schools becoming less inclined to share relevant information with their teachers pertaining to MCAS. Ironically, such action could further exacerbate the lack of information necessary for teachers to adequately prepare for the test.

A majority of the principals believed that MCAS testing should be modified in some form or manner to better accommodate the needs of individual students and schools. These principals recommended ideas such as making the test less difficult, administering a nationally normed test and placing less attention on the highest test scores. Although they still preferred a test with less accountability, many of the participants like the MCAS because it has helped to define a structured school setting.

Two of the principals, both with high scoring schools, were content with the emphasis placed on MCAS scores. Both of the principals were from category "D" and their schools scored very well on the MCAS. None of the principals who scored in the two lowest categories felt inclined to support MCAS in its current state. These findings are not surprising in that principals whose schools score well are less likely to be concerned about the test, as they are the ones to benefit from the good publicity generated by high test scores. Conversely, lower scoring schools are apt to feel that an unfair amount of attention is placed on the test when scores are released and the school's credibility is subject to public scrutiny.

The recommendations made by many of the principals were related in that they sought to downgrade the complexity of the MCAS in order to meet the needs of a broader range of students. With the "bar" set for only the brightest students to achieve full success, many principals viewed the MCAS in a negative manner. Although they admit that MCAS has provided the foundation for a more structured learning environment, they fear that many students will continue to be concerned and do poorly on this one form of assessment. Accordingly, in order to better meet the needs of a diverse learning community, the state must recognize that MCAS is but one form of assessment and should begin to develop alternative assessment tools. The state does permit MCAS portfolios in lieu of testing, but only for the most severely disabled. The issue is that the students are scored on their portfolios according to the same strands and frameworks that regular education students of the same grade level are also scored against. Principals are invested in their students and their test scores, but not at the cost of undermining the learning process.

The participants in this study all believed that MCAS has changed their daily responsibilities in some manner. Most agreed that they spend more time focusing on what is actually being taught in the classroom on a regular basis then they have in the past. Others found that MCAS uses "chunks," of time over the period of a year. Some principals are affected by MCAS on a daily basis while others focus on it only in April and May. The time consumed by all aspects of the test has forced principals to better define their priorities on both a short and long term basis.

Many principals believed that MCAS, and more importantly education reform, is responsible for making their jobs more challenging then ever before. Principals are less likely to remain complacent if they feel teachers are not teaching the correct information to the students. They are much more inclined to act upon substandard teaching and proactively engage teachers in refining subject area information and teaching skills. The level of accountability associated with the MCAS, including the public release of the test scores, directly affects how much time and effort principals now place on the importance of doing well on the test.

According to half of the respondents, the public release of the test scores has impacted the school community and principals negatively. These administrators feel that the release of the scores alters the public's perception of how "well" schools are educating today's youth. They remain concerned that schools are now solely judged on their MCAS scores presented in the media. Another collection of principals believed that the release of the test scores serves to motivate teachers and administrators to continually improve the educational outcomes expected from the students.

Despite these variations, the release of the scores seems to serve two purposes. One purpose is to hold schools accountable for their alignment with the curriculum frameworks. If the test were not released to the public there would be far fewer schools in the state attempting to align themselves with the state curriculum. The second purpose is to make the general public feel that their tax dollars are being put to good use. This stems from the steep increase in educational funding that accompanied the Education Reform Act in 1993, as legislators realized that their constituents would demand some form of accountability on the part of the schools.

When asked how the MCAS fits within their ideal vision of student learning gains/assessment, the responses often included the idea that more than one assessment tool is needed by the state in reference to the curriculum frameworks. Principals were critical of the reliance placed upon the test scores as the only means of assessing students within the state. Used in conjunction with other forms of student assessment, several principals felt that "a number of factors" should be taken into consideration when assessing students and MCAS should be one of them.

Several respondents feel that MCAS has fit in well with their vision of student learning and helps schools remain focused. The idea that MCAS can be used as a "barometer" to assist principals in measuring achievement levels is welcomed. Since the inception of the testing, some principals believe that the overall education students now receive is much better then it was only a few years ago. Likewise, a majority of the principals believed that MCAS has helped teachers and schools correlate the curriculum frameworks and the core content areas. On a daily basis, teachers are focusing lessons

and units around strands within the frameworks and less on lessons that may be a "favorite" topic.

The consistency developed through this level of commonality around curriculum serves the purpose of further fostering a state-wide curriculum without formally mandating that schools adhere to one. The daily work of the school has changed in that principals, teachers and students are now centering their attention on specific curricular needs rather than areas of interest for either student or teacher. With the common curriculum tested on the MCAS, schools are less likely to deviate from the standards established by the state. The consistency associated with the MCAS test has permitted the state to institute a curriculum that is taught from Pittsfield to Provincetown.

In reviewing the data, it is apparent that many of the principals' responses favor the standardization of the curriculum through the use of the MCAS. This standardization has brought test scores up for those schools whose performance objectives are based solely upon the curriculum frameworks. The issue arises when one questions the legitimacy of a state driven curriculum that supersedes the local curricula. Only a 3 of the participants shared any concerns over the loss of curricular control. Perhaps principals have decided that the Board of Education and the Department of Education are better prepared for designing curricula for all students or that they are resigned to a reality they feel they cannot change.

As with any change, the shift to a state-wide curriculum after decades of local curricular control has ignited discussions that both support and oppose the new frameworks. Many of the principals believe that the frameworks have developed a more consistent learning environment whereby students will have an equal opportunity at

attaining the information found in the state frameworks. Other principals are concerned that through the relinquishing of local control, the state will continue to increase the authority it has over school districts. This discussion on standards based learning in Massachusetts is one that is also happening at the national level. In order for principals, teachers and schools to remain unique, there must be a balance between national/state control and local control. While principals have found the common curriculum to be a strong tool in providing teachers with the information necessary to teach students, many would argue that teachers need autonomy in the classroom in order to address broader philosophical issues related to learning. Growing literature in critical pedagogy and experiential learning has established the need for educators to design a curriculum that is flexible and adaptive to individual, group, and communal interests and issues. For example, Ted Sizer's Coalition for Essential Schools has advocated the use of portfolios as a means to bring together the various strands of a given curriculum without limiting the scope of a student's performance and evaluation (1986). Together, teachers, students and parents have an opportunity to become more directly involved in the learning process than might otherwise be possible in a more traditionally administered curriculum.

According to the respondents, professional development has changed drastically with the arrival of MCAS. Professional development is now centered upon enhancing language arts programs [reading and writing], math programs, differentiated instruction and other programs that serve to improve MCAS scores. Most of the administrators interviewed believe that professional development is much more focused on curriculum since MCAS testing began.

Furthermore, since the advent of MCAS, most administrators have now directed professional development money and time toward curricular modifications and improvements. Yet as one principal explains, she is torn between curricular professional development for her staff versus a behavior management program. Many principals feel obligated to improve academic instruction to the point where other basic teacher training such as classroom management or technology, may be neglected.

Many schools have also been involved in hiring curriculum specialists who directly help teachers to become more familiar with the frameworks and indirectly improve MCAS scores. Early literacy, remediation, and writing across the curriculum are only a few of the specialties principals are enlisting for their teachers. Hence, professional development in today's schools is almost always connected back to the curriculum frameworks and MCAS. The unfortunate aspect of this finding is that schools that require professional development around social issues, classroom management or bullying will be less inclined to provide the training for teachers if their MCAS scores need improvement. Thus the low performing schools in many of the rural and urban districts that desperately need training for their teachers around cultural and social issues are instead focusing their attention on improving MCAS scores.

Nearly all of the principals interviewed have attempted to "protect" their teachers from the pressures to perform well on the test. These principals have felt that they should bear the burden of dealing with the public or district offices concerning test scores. Principals have feared teachers becoming nervous about trying to improve the scores and ultimately conveying those feelings to students. Other administrators have been more

direct with their teachers and have talked regularly about MCAS during staff meetings and on other occasions.

Although principals believed that they were spending more time teaching to the test through the infusion of the curriculum frameworks, there was less concern about this issue since they have focused on aligning their curricula with the frameworks. Their belief is that if the MCAS tests what is in the frameworks then they believe that it is appropriate to then teach to the test. Again, few principals questioned the information found in the frameworks or the loss of local control of the curriculum. Instead, the majority of the participants chose to align their curricula in order to perform well on the test.

The amount of information disseminated by the Massachusetts DOE regarding MCAS is something that principals have felt the state has done well. Most principals obtained information and news regarding MCAS from the DOE website which provides detailed information on all aspects of the test including retired test questions. The quantity of information principals are required to process concerning the MCAS was the only concern voiced by the administrators. Some believed that there is too much information to properly review and be responsible for as the building principal.

Through the state's efforts, MCAS information has been easily attainable by principals across Massachusetts. Though some principals did not agree with MCAS they all felt that the DOE has been thorough and timely in their efforts to inform principals about the MCAS.

An aspect of this study included analyzing how principals would respond to certain questions posed during the interview in terms of their attitudes about the MCAS. In Chapter III, I reviewed the information pertaining to both opponents and proponents of state-mandated testing in Massachusetts in order to make correlations between principals' responses and the claims made by *MassInsight* and *FairTest* could be substantiated. After rating their individual responses as *negative, positive* or *indifferent*, I cross-tabulated all of the responses to find commonalities and disparities among the principals. Toward the end of this chapter I review the themes that emerged from my analysis of the participants transcripts and further address my hypotheses on principals who have responses that are aligned with the anti-testing movement.

The first supposition was that there would be a relationship between positive responses generated by principals to questions such as #4, #7 and #8 and claims made by pro-testing groups such as *MassInsight.* All three of these questions elicited definitive responses from principals that allowed for generalized categorization. The theory was accurate for questions #4 (Are you satisfied with the amount of emphasis placed on state assessment scores?) and #8 (How does the MCAS fit within your ideal vision of student learning gains/assessment?) in that principals who answered positively about question # 4 were more likely to support question #8. On the contrary, Question #7, which dealt with the public release of the test scores, was viewed positively by only three of the respondents who also replied with affirmative responses to questions #4 and #8. One could deduce from this information that although some principals may support the MCAS and how it has helped to change education in Massachusetts, not all principals would agree that the public release of the test scores is appropriate. For many principals, the

release of the test scores places undue pressure on students, teachers and themselves. Additionally, the amount of publicity generated from the public release of the test scores often overshadows the other performative elements of each school.

The second postulation sought to correlate negative responses from principals with groups who oppose the MCAS such as *MassParents* and *FairTest*. Only a few principals responded negatively to a majority of the questions, yet some of the same principals replied positively to other questions. Specifically, both Barbara and Suzanne, whose schools were categorized in group A and who replied with more negative responses than their peers, answered that the state test did reflect their priorities for instruction. Interestingly, Suzanne also believed that the test was effective in assessing student achievement, even though she was dissatisfied with the emphasis placed on MCAS.

The replies of the administrators who were opposed to the MCAS were not as clearly defined as I had anticipated and were more often categorized as *indifferent*. In fact, only Carla's and Cliff's responses could be fully aligned with those of *FairTest* in that almost all of their responses were critical of the MCAS. Other principals' interviews, such as Eileen's and Janine's were filled with responses that were categorized as *indifferent* because they contained information that was neither completely *positive* nor *negative*. Suzanne and Barbara were also very critical of the MCAS but had favorable responses to several of the questions. Thus one could deduce that principals are more likely to maintain a balanced view regarding the pros and cons associated with MCAS, while public interest groups are more likely to have divisive sentiments pertaining to the test. This finding is probably due to the fact that principals are in positions that allows

them to directly experience and assess the pragmatic aspects of MCAS as it impacts the performance and assessment within a school environment.

Prior to analyzing and reviewing the data collected from the interviews, I had anticipated that principals would have been more likely to voice their criticisms of MCAS because their responses were anonymous. Cliff, Carla, Suzanne and Barbara were extremely judgmental of MCAS in a majority of their responses while many of the other principals viewed the test more positively. This does not imply that the principals interviewed were not forthright in their responses or unwilling to divulge their true feelings. Instead, this may indicate that many principals are content with or complacent about the MCAS and are more interested in developing professional development and aligning curricula with the state frameworks. One could argue that the initial distress associated with testing has subsided as principals become better acquainted with how best to prepare their schools for the test. Or it could indicate that, although some principals are not completely content with the MCAS, they are nevertheless responsible for administering the test, and have not been able to contest its use in Massachusetts' schools under the current legislation.

Although a majority of the principals spoke favorably about the MCAS, there remained criticisms of the test that should not be overlooked. Many principals continued to express concern that the MCAS should not be used in isolation to judge student achievement. Administrators are interested in other forms of assessment that compliment the criterion referenced MCAS such as portfolios or teacher observations. Many principals were also apprehensive about the public release of the test scores and the association of poor teaching with poor MCAS scores. The pressure to perform well on

the test extends from the top to the bottom of the hierarchical ladder in schools, with students ultimately under the most distress. Principals attempt to protect their teachers and students from the pressures associated with the test but eventually the score or ranking of the school becomes either a symbol of success or failure.

Ultimately, the hesitancy of many of the respondents indicates that the MCAS is only one aspect of an extremely complicated and time-consuming profession. Principals are so over-burdened and taxed with the everyday routines of running a school that they do not have time to make MCAS a priority. Today's principal must be a manager, instructional leader, visionary and politician. The current trend in educational leadership stresses that principals understand curricula and are able to articulate a vision associated with student learning. The days of a principal managing the school from his/her office have departed. As one principal noted, the MCAS is a "piece" of the assessment "pie."

Perhaps the ambivalence perceived within the responses indicates that the MCAS has become integrated into the educational setting more then I had expected. Rather then being a completely separate assessment tool, the alignment with the curriculum frameworks seems to have entrenched principals in a mode of operation that incorporates MCAS into the school's educational foundations.

Contributions

In his 1993 study of principal and teacher reactions to high stakes tests, Brown discovered that while participants viewed testing as a controversial issue, they found some value in the test results (p. 19). A similar reaction was reflected in the responses obtained within this study. However, whereas most of Brown's respondents reported that

they "never used the results or used them very little in making decisions concerning students," Massachusetts principals have used the MCAS results to develop school improvement plans, professional development goals, and to institute reform through curricular modifications (p. 23). Like those participants who believed that there were several advantages of receiving test scores, the principals in this study also agreed that state-mandated testing is useful, especially when used in conjunction with other formal and informal assessment tools. As in Brown's study, many principals feel negatively about the amount of emphasis placed on the test results. They are concerned about the reliance upon one test as the sole assessment measure of student performance, and believe that too much time is spent on the MCAS scores.

Although Brown discovered that a majority of his respondents felt that there was too much emphasis placed on state-mandated test scores, more than half of the principals in this study indicated that they were satisfied with the amount of attention given to MCAS. One reason for this may include the intensive development of the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks as a guide to assist schools in determining the areas in need of assessment. Another reason might be found in the fact that, since 1993, when Brown's study was released, Massachusetts has infused millions of dollars into education at both the local and state level. The combination of the frameworks and financial support has likely helped principals become more receptive to educational reform measures including state-mandated testing. Furthermore, the Department of Education has provided principals in Massachusetts with sufficient supportive materials designed to inform educators about the goals of the test.

Finally, while most of the respondents in Brown's study recommended that state testing be eliminated with criticisms directed at the inadequate feedback of the test to improve teaching strategies as well as concerns over time taken away from other important instruction, none of the principals in this study sought the elimination of state-mandated testing. Nevertheless, most of the principals in this study agreed that the test should be modified in some manner in order to be more equitable.

Given these comparisons, there are many conclusions that can be drawn. In Brown's study he contended that principals felt ostracized from the decision making process at the state level, thus relinquishing their local control on curricular decision making. Principals in this study did not mention such issues; in fact many condoned the use of a standardized curriculum. States such as Massachusetts have developed consistent, detailed curriculum frameworks which seem to enhance the educational opportunities occurring in today's schools. The MCAS testing that works in conjunction with the frameworks has been accepted by most principals because it serves a purpose. However, Brown found that principals who were uncertain of the meaning of state mandated assessments were less likely to embrace them. Although some principals are critical of the amount of time it has taken the state to refine and adopt all of the frameworks, Massachusetts has worked diligently at matching the standards used for teaching and testing. Consequently, other states that develop consistent, in-depth curriculum frameworks in conjunction with regular forms of assessment such as the MCAS may receive better support from school administrators.

Another point of interest within this study is that many principals appreciate having a standardized curriculum that has resulted in a more consistent education for

students across the state. Several of the senior administrators interviewed value such standardization after having been principals for many years without specific guidelines for learning. As Brown notes, in 1993 principals in his study were not pleased with the idea of abandoning control of their curriculums to the state. Perhaps principals in this current study would have responded similarly about MCAS if they had been interviewed several years ago when education reform was first introduced. Nevertheless, in the state of Massachusetts principals continue to have autonomy when it comes to implementing curricular changes within their buildings even though they must now align teaching and assessment with the frameworks and ultimately the MCAS.

While responses from principals within both studies were not always commensurate, a common theme between Brown's study and this research is that principals continue to view state mandated testing as one form of assessment. Although principals of the current study have fewer reservations about the use of the MCAS, they remain tentative about utilizing the assessment in isolation in order to determine items such as student placement. Principals use scores to assist in guiding professional development, instructional strategies, and curricular modifications, but not without factoring in other forms of assessment such as nationally normed tests and teacher assessments. Education professor Dan Koretz from Harvard University notes that, "It's axiomatic in measurement that you should never make serious decisions about a child based on a single test" (2002, p. 6). He cites several reasons for this including the incomplete nature of the tests and the belief that teachers and students will only focus on the test if that is the single form of assessment utilized. Koretz fears that current standardized testing may supplant rather than supplement the teaching occurring in the

classroom. However, continued dialogue is needed between administrators, educators, students, the public, and the state regarding the need for additional assessment measures other than the MCAS to evaluate a student's overall performance. Through a well-rounded evaluative structure, administrators would use MCAS as one of several elements of a comprehensive assessment system.

If a true "comprehensive assessment system" is to be developed, the state will have to become more responsive to administrators concerned about the MCAS' current exclusivity as a high-stakes test linked to graduation requirement. Although the administrators interviewed for this study were primary and middle level principals, the difficulty associated with the test at all levels is a challenge every principal must actively confront. The DOE continues to make modifications to the MCAS as the 2003 graduation requirement nears but students will still be required to pass the test in order to receive a diploma. Many groups critical of the MCAS have called for a delay in the requirement that would allow the state to work through the flaws within the test and the frameworks. Such a delay would be beneficial to all parties involved because it would permit the DOE and schools to have consistent expectations for student learning. Students who will be required to pass the exam in 2003 are at a substantial disadvantage than those who will take the test even one or two years later. Subsequently, a more effective approach to implementing state mandated testing would need to include enough time for school districts to align their curricula and for the state to refine and improve their assessment system.

Themes

One of the most interesting findings within this study was the clearly defined division in principals' perceptions about the MCAS when comparing schools from the low and high scoring categories. First, principals in categories "B" and "A" were less likely to support MCAS than their peers in categories "C" and "D." The schools categorized as "A" and "B" were also only from Rural and Urban districts. Second, many of the principals, especially those from lower scoring schools, were critical of the public release of the test scores. Finally, a third theme to emerge was that principals from categories "A" and "B" were more likely to disagree with the amount of emphasis placed on the MCAS than principals from higher scoring schools.

All three of these themes are bound by the issues that many of the opponents of MCAS have raised concerns about. They all involve the differences not only between high, medium and low scoring schools on the MCAS but also the disparities among those who will prosper in our society and those who may not. Principals from the "A" and "B" schools were not proud of their scores because, compared to most schools, the scores were below average. These were also the principals from lower socio-economic school districts where economic, cultural and racial diversity was more prominent than that of the schools in the suburbs. Those groups who oppose MCAS because of the inequities in the test itself as well as the disparities associated with the test takers, schools, teachers and principals are clearly moving in a direction to equalize the academic setting for all students. The MCAS tests students on their knowledge of the curriculum frameworks, but many of the students from the suburban school districts enter school with more basic skills than those in rural or urban districts. Eventually, the gap between the districts will

widen further as the schools address the academic, social and emotional needs of all students as they continue their educations.

The three themes discussed in this paper are significant because they illustrate that principals' perceptions of the MCAS are usually related to how well their school scores on the test as well as where their school is geographically located. The Massachusetts Department of Education must continue to work with principals from underachieving schools if they expect rural and urban schools to compete with those in the suburbs. The state government, educators and the public must realize that the rift between the scores of the low and high scoring schools may never close since the difference is considered by many to already be insurmountable. I am not implying that all students do not have the right to equal educational opportunities. Rather, I am recommending that the state modify the scoring process to take into account items such as poverty, English As A Second Language, and time in school.[15] There are few if any suburban school districts in Massachusetts with poverty, ESL, teacher retention, professional development and transient student population issues as great as those found in cities such as Springfield, Lawrence or Worcester. Another suggestion could be to use a rating system within predetermined categories. Schools could be categorized by the number of students who receive free or reduced breakfast/lunch and then be compared within those categories as they were for the MEAPS. As one principal mentions from this study, one cannot compare an urban school to one in Concord. In any case, principals from urban and rural

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[15] According to recent figures released by the Mass. DOE, students who have not passed the MCAS at the 10th grade level are more likely to be consistently absent from school, with 50% of the students in the class of 2003 who haven't passed MCAS missing at least 16 days of school.

settings must prepare their teachers and students for the MCAS differently from those principals in suburban school systems.

Recommendations for Future Research

As data was reviewed for this study, several "subset" questions emerged that could be utilized in future studies concerning MCAS and the building principal. Although the "subset" questions are a result of post-interview analysis and did not play a role in the interview process for this study, they should serve the purpose of expanding the purview of this study for future studies conducted on this topic. There are several key questions that emerged from the data analysis:

- Do you feel that you have a voice in shaping the role and content of "high stakes" testing in Massachusetts?
- What has been lost or abandoned in your school since the onset of MCAS?
- Do you believe that the standardization of the curriculum through the MCAS supercedes local curricular control? If so, how has it affected your school?
- How do you use the results of the MCAS to meet the needs of a diverse learning community?
- In what ways should the public release of the MCAS scores be modified?
- Would you be more or less supportive of MCAS if it was not the only form of assessment conducted by the state? Explain.
- Would you be more or less supportive of MCAS if "high stakes" were not attached to the scores at the tenth grade level? Explain.

Despite the findings and gains obtained through this study, further research is needed to better address the limitations of this analysis. Continued research must include interviewing the same core group of principals in order to compare current responses with future findings regarding MCAS as it is further developed. By interviewing the

same principals and using the interview schedule and format, one could study the long-term effects of the MCAS on principals. Comparing responses between a span of three to five years would allow researchers to continue to document and further analyze how principals integrate their educational beliefs into their roles as building administrators.

A broader electronic or postal mail survey could be conducted that would provide a larger sample for analysis of principals' perceptions of the MCAS. Although quantitative in nature, such a study would allow researchers to further investigate the themes I have discussed concerning principals in various socio-economic settings.

Other studies associated with this topic could be conducted with administrators at the district level that would include superintendents, assistant superintendents and curriculum directors. Since many of the broad decisions concerning the curriculum are made at the district level, interviewing other school administrators would present a wider range of information on a larger scale than that of the building principal. Although they are removed from the day-to-day activities in the classrooms, district level administrators are often directly responsible for how a town or school district approaches issues such as curriculum alignment and the MCAS.

Since there are a vast number of principals who will be retiring within the next several years, further research should also be conducted concerning the differences and similarities between veteran and "new" principals' perceptions of the MCAS. All of the principals in this study had at least a decade of experience as a building administrator. Reviewing data from newly appointed principals would serve to better define the ever-changing role of the principal.

Finally, future research that would include survey data from states other than Massachusetts on administrators' perceptions of the state mandated testing would benefit researchers interested in testing at the national level. Samples could be gathered from each state and then analyzed and compared. Findings from such research could be used to review various reactions to state testing and for recommendations about the principal's role in the implementation of state-mandated assessment.

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